AHEADシリーズ

# 終わりのクロニクル 5【下】

著●川上稔
イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

電撃文庫

# 終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

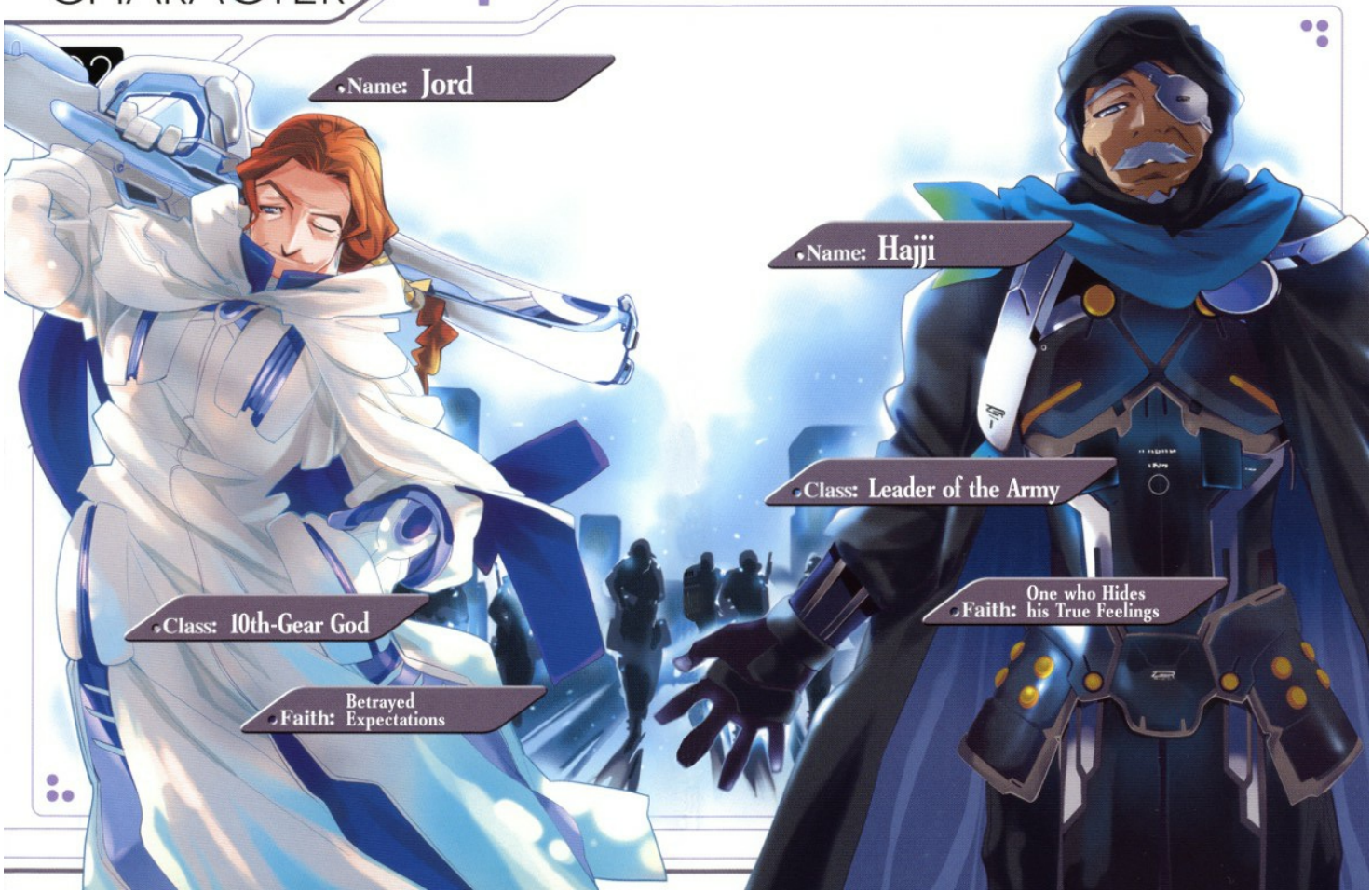
## 5
## 【下】

**—Everyone,**
**It is time to gather**
**At our place.**

The Ending Chronicle

# Act.05

# CHARACTER


Name: Jord
Class: 10th-Gear God
Faith: Betrayed Expectations
Name: Hajji
Class: Leader of the Army
Faith: One who Hides his True Feelings

04

But during the Concept War,
a skilled king resumed construction of Zahhak.
They desired to make 9th-Gear easier to live in and
to take in immigrants from other Gears.

Name: Mikage

## About 9th-Gear

9th-Gear was a vast spherical world made of heat and shadow.
The people lived while gathering around the valuable water.
After several internal conflicts, the people gathered as a
single community, built a city, and named a king.
At the same time, they began constructing the great mechanical
dragon Zahhak to remake the land of 9th-Gear, but
construction ended before its completion.

Name: Baku

03

# TODAY'S "TRUE QUICK TASTE"

Super Spicy (Deadly) "FRIED CHICKEN"

## WELCOME TO THE PRACTICE KITCHEN

"Hello! Today's True QT is my fried chicken!! They call it a soft fry in Japan, right!?"

"You are always so excitable, Heo. So how do you make it?"

"I feel like you just said something mean... A-anyway, let's hurry up and get this started. Ready, go! Cha cha cha cha cha! The bones are in the way, so let's just take them out! Wow, I'm so observant!"

"Um, Heo?"

"Cha cha cha! There, done! ...M-Mikage? Did I do something wrong? Did I skip over too much with my 'chas'?"

"Yes. And if you take out the bones, it isn't fried chicken. These look more like chicken tenders."

"..."

"You really are observant, Mikage."

**●Ingredients:**

- Chicken ..... 2 Pieces
- Eggs ..... 1
- Flour ..... 1 Tablespoon
- Oil ..... For Frying

**●Seasoning:**

- Sake ..... 1 Teaspoon
- Salt ..... 1.5 Teaspoons
- Pepper ..... 1/4 Teaspoon

* Basil, sage, nutmeg, and clove.

**●Recipe:**

① : Rub the seasoning into the chicken. Mix in *.
② : Leave 1 in the refrigerator for one hour.
③ : Break the egg and massage it into 1.
④ : Massage the flour into 3.
⑤ : Fry it in the oil on medium heat (around 170 degrees) for five minutes. Then fry it on high heat (around 190 degrees) for forty seconds to a minute.

終わりのクロニクル 5下

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ボク達が立ち向かえるように。

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カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

# 05

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- 佐山・薫 — 養父
- 新庄・要 — 新庄の肉親?
- 趙・晴 — 若作り
- サンダーソン — 機竜乗り
- ?
  - 新庄・由起緒 — 新庄の母?

### 元護国課

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- 大城・一夫 — 困った老人

**1st-G**

- ブレンヒルト — 美術部部長
- ディアナ — 独逸UCAT

**2nd-G**

- 鹿島・昭緒 — 2nd-Gの軍神
- 月読・史弦 — 開発部部長

ヒオ・T — おろおろ娘

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# Chapter 20

## "Lesson in the Dark"

After you are taught
And after you learn
What have you gained?

●

A small room was filled with blue light.

The room was bell shaped and had a diameter of about five meters.

The walls and floor were made of stone cut much like bricks and it had no windows.

The room was underground.

It had a single entrance and led nowhere else.

It appeared empty except for the desk in the center.

A bookcase sat on the desk, but it held no books.

There was a pen holder that doubled as a paperweight, but it held no pens. And yet a clear inkbottle sat next to it.

A boy stood in front of the desk and the items on it.

He wore a suit with the name Sayama stitched inside it.

He looked around the room and behind him.

"There is nothing else here."

He had solved the riddle in the Kinugasa residence's storehouse and he had reached this room by taking the staircase that had appeared.

The stairs into the darkness had continued down for about twenty meters before arriving at this room.

He had not noticed any tricks in the staircase passageway.

*…So is the Kinugasa Document in this underground space?*

He looked around again, but there was still nothing.

"This is supposed to be a study, so what is this?"

As he muttered to himself, he pulled a document from his pocket.

It was the Georgius Development Plan. His father had written it, but the project had been abandoned before completion. He read one line printed on the cover.

"Written based on the Kinugasa Document acquired at the Kinugasa residence."

The supposed Kinugasa Document should have been here.

Had his parents taken it back with them and had it since been thrown out or sealed away?

"I can reject that boring possibility. If my parents had taken back what they found here, would that have included every last pen and every last book in the bookcase? And if they did, would they leave

the paperweight behind? No, they would not."

He vigorously swung his arm up and pointed in an arbitrary direction.

The cloth of the suit gave a nice snapping sound as he posed and spoke.

"There is something hidden here. Yes, the shy truth is hiding in this very room."

He laughed and brought a hand to his forehead.

He breathed a sigh of self-praise before continuing.

"I am in an excellent mood today, I sound magnificent even as I speak to myself, and just one problem faces me here: where have the contents of the study gone?"

He stretched his empty right hand toward the inkbottle on the desk.

He picked it up, checked the ink from the side, and found about half of the black ink was gone.

"This is the answer."

He flicked the bottle's lid with his thumb and it opened with the sensation of scraping across dry dirt.

The sticky smell of ink reached his nose.

He gently shook the bottle to ensure the ink rippled.

"The entrance to the truth is not here. In other words, the truth is hidden. Hidden by this fake 'empty study'."

So…

"How about I look at it in reverse? *What if I try to hide the fake with what is real* ? Using the real ink I have here!"

He swung his right hand.

The contents of the inkbottle splattered around him.

He heard the scattering droplets and the speed of the ink caused it to burst into a mist.

The black danced through the blue-lit room.

"…"

And the world melted away.

As the spraying liquid filled the room, the room itself was peeled away, starting from the top.

The empty walls were stripped away from top to bottom and they revealed…

"The truth."

A moment later, he saw bookcases and a floor overflowing with an ocean of books.

Even the floor he stood on was a layer of books.

He then saw a document sitting on the desk in front of him.

A pen sat on it and the title had been quickly written out.

“Georgius Development Plan!! By Kinugasa Tenkyou!”

As soon as his reading of the title filled the room, something welled up from the bottom of the bell-shaped room.

“…?”

A sense of expansion rose from the below the floor, almost like heat.

*Something is coming,* he thought as that something floated up into the air.

It was writing.

Black writing rose from anywhere and everywhere: between the pages of the surrounding books, from their covers, from the papers scattered around the room, or from below those papers.

There was hiragana, katakana, kanji, the alphabet, numbers, symbols, the lines of ruled paper, periods, and commas. They all floated around the room as if they had been granted freedom.

It was all writing.

Sayama could no longer see across the room.

Soon, that writing began to move.

First, it moved right.

It formed a gentle wave, but a breath later, the surface of the writing was swaying back to the left.

Soon, it moved right again.

“…!”

The right-moving and left-moving writing split and…

“It’s rotating!?”

As if to answer Sayama’s doubt, the tens of thousands of characters began rotating around the room either to the left or right.

The writing quickly rotated in opposite directions above the sea of books. They intertwined, split apart, spun, split some more, and raced along.

He looked up at it all and the writing showed no sign of stopping.

Like an astronomical model, the writing formed several rings that

rotated inside the room, intersected, and continued spinning.

One ring slowly flashed yellow, one ring remained black as it intersected with another and sent sparks flying, and one ring glowed silver while ticking like a clock's seconds hand.

In the center, sudden curiosity led Sayama to raise his hands toward the astronomical model of writing.

He touched a spot where left and right rings intersected.

He wondered if he was being careless, but he was touching information.

His physical fingers passed right through the rings of writing.

"…!?"

An image flashed in the back of his mind.

The information expressed by the writing had been given form and replayed in his brain.

A scene played for the information in the right ring and the information in the left ring.

"…four-way barrier is apparently the only option. 10th's dragon will apparently pursue the refugees. I've heard something similar will eventually happen with 2nd-Gear, but first, 10th's divine dragon will arrive as if making a demonstration. Kaoru-kun has nearly completed the technique for constructing a four-way barrier, so he is a step ahead of the 2nd-Gear engineers developing the celestial seal. However, one thing is lacking. For the barrier to function properly, someone must make a decree in the center. I am sure he will volunteer for that, but that will mean someone else must fill his normal position and I do not think I will last long if I…"

"…only natural. There is a mystery about Low-Gear that only some residents of 9th and 10th have noticed. It seems they occasionally invade Low-Gear, but when they return, they often find that invasion was for nothing. Why is that? That will surely be discovered after my death. So before sealing the divine dragon, I will ask a certain question while I can still push myself: Why did I name this world Low-Gear? And I have a message for the later generation: If you wish to know the identity of Babel, you must seek the truth of this world…"

"…!?"

Sayama quickly jerked back his hands.

The information had been directly carved into his mind and not

even his racing pulse could help him process it.

*…What was that? What was I just told?*

For one…

"There is a mystery about Low-Gear?"

And…

"The identity of Babel?"

What did that mean?

The first record had likely been about the seal for 10th-Gear's divine dragon.

His grandfather had created the seal used to obtain 10th-Gear's Concept Core and Professor Kinugasa had predicted his own death in the process.

But the next record was the problem.

Sayama had his own guesses as to what Babel was.

But…

*…I must seek the truth of this world?*

What had Kinugasa Tenkyou known?

And when his parents had presumably seen that record…

*…Did they learn something? Or did they know something?*

He shook his question-filled head.

This was not the time.

He had come here to check the Kinugasa Document on Georgius. His mother had left Georgius with him and his father had tried to create it yet abandoned it, so he had to know what it was.

For that reason, he firmly faced forward. That was when he noticed something.

A single ring floated in the center of his vision.

The thirty centimeter ring of writing floated above the Kinugasa Document.

Bluish-white dots raced across its surface and slowly rotated.

"So this is the embodiment of the knowledge inside the Kinugasa Document."

He no longer hesitated to reach out.

As if watched over by the massive amount of information circling around him, he touched the information he was searching for.

"…"

As soon as he grabbed it, it fully expanded in the back of his mind.

He saw the embodiment of the knowledge related to Georgius.

●

Sayama knew.

He did not see it and he did not hear it. He simply knew it as knowledge.

The only other way to describe it was as a memory. The knowledge entered his brain via his memories.

*…What is this?*

It arrived.

He could tell that something greater than his five senses had reached him.

Why was the letter “a” pronounced “a”? Why did people read a string of letters as a sound and a meaning? What filled his memory now was “pure” information that preceded those questions.

Georgius was poured into his mind and memories like that.

He became aware of the information in his mind as he translated it into words.

The images he saw were instants of the past displayed on the screen of his memories.

He first saw a yard beneath a clear sky.

The gravel-covered yard had crops growing in the back and beyond that was a field full of rapeseed, a forest, and a mountain range continuing downwards.

This was the yard of Professor Kinugasa’s house.

The gaze viewing it was inside the house. It sat next to a tea table in the living room.

Only a right arm was visible and that arm was resting on the documents sitting on the tea table.

His thoughts reached Sayama’s memories and Sayama’s language comprehension translated them into words.

“Here I will record the results of my examination of the concept weapon made to restrict any and all concepts.”

That weapon’s name was…

“It is commonly known as Georgius. It takes the form of two gauntlets, but I currently only possess the right one. I acquired it in a certain place, but I lost the left one in the process. The one who will later create and use an identical concept weapon will surely learn at one point that I possessed this one. And I must state this

here: Georgius must not be made."

The scene changed to the inside a dimly-lit wooden building. The room contained rows of washing stations by the window as if in an art room or a workshop. Thick wooden work desks lined the room and Sayama's gaze sat at a desk piled with documents.

Someone walked around the pile of documents and into view.

It was a young man in a lab coat. When Sayama saw the slender man with long hair, a name filled his mind.

"Shinjou-kun?"

Except he did not look all that much like her. He was taller and bonier.

But the smile he made as he gave a greeting did remind Sayama of hers.

*…Is this part of my Shinjou-kun withdrawal symptoms?*

He tilted his head and the gaze's owner handed a document to the young man.

The young man took it and suddenly looked to the side.

Someone had entered the room.

The young man looked a bit surprised to see the person, but then he smiled and opened his mouth.

His mouth moved to call someone's name and the movements were much like those Sayama often saw. There was no sound here, so he could only read the vowel sounds.

*…Ah – ah – ah – un.*

*I see. So this is the National Defense Department,* he realized as someone's thoughts reached his mind.

"Georgius is a machine built to capture its user's willpower so it can either amplify or destroy that world's positive and negative concepts. In other words, it is an amplifier for and weapon against all concepts."

There was a pause as if for a breath.

"As Georgius must not have its power disturbed by any concept, its foundational component must be a power that is not bound by concepts. That is, it must be given an operational mechanism that works under all concepts and can ignore or overcome those concepts."

Sayama mentally frowned at what the thought said.

*…Ignore or overcome all concepts?*

Did something like that really exist?

"If it does, it cannot be light or heat," he muttered. "It could not be anything bound by the laws of physics. Something that exists even in absolute nothingness."

A story suddenly came to him.

That story said the world had once been in a state of chaotic darkness where everything was formless.

"Let there be light…and there was light."

He thought it was wrong to use those words to say light was the strongest thing of all.

What was it that had ignored the chaos and created the light?

"A will."

As if in response, the scene before him changed.

He was now on a mountain ridge with an excellent view and his vision was walking with around ten other people.

One was the young man who resembled Shinjou and he was falling behind.

A young man in a military coat split off from those moving on ahead and walked back to that first young man.

The owner of the gaze smiled as he watched them.

A voice reached Sayama's mind.

"A will. We can say that the appearance of every concept involves what we can call that concept's will. And it is possible to seal a will inside a machine. 3rd-Gear's gods of war and 5th-Gear's mechanical dragons are proof enough of that. However…"

The scene changed again. This time to a destroyed city.

The gaze stood between buildings that crumbled and sent smoke into the clear sky. The water being used to put out a fire flowed into the street and the owner of the gaze looked west with a few of his comrades.

A blue truck arrived while weaving between the people weakly placing scrap wood out in the road.

"But that means Georgius's final necessary component is a person. A person must be broken down and their will must be transferred inside, along with their flesh and blood, to give Georgius its own existence. That will create a weapon with a mind of its own. However, the will that enters Georgius must be perfectly synchronized with the weapon. To prevent even an instantaneous

error or time lag, their entire body and sense of judgment must be made into Georgius. …However, this will erase their personality and transform their will into nothing but a component."

And…

"That is why the creation of Georgius must not continue."

The scene changed to the underground study Sayama stood inside.

However, this gaze still was not his own.

*…Is this still the past?*

As if to confirm that, the gaze spoke from in front of the desk at the center of the piles of books and bookcases.

"Nevertheless, I possess the negative Georgius. Due to a promise I made, I cannot reveal where it came from and the positive Georgius that goes with it has been lost. But in the distant future, it should reappear. I hope that both of them will be held by their proper owners. …For that reason, I will later seal the negative Georgius in a place I know very well. To ensure no one foolishly seeks to create a similar item, I will leave only this document here."

The voice paused as if to breathe.

"I pray that there is no conflict over the use of Georgius."

Sayama was suddenly knocked away by the words of the gaze, by those words his own mind was creating.

He fell into darkness. He fell into the shadows that led back to reality and the present day.

But he had seen the answer. He knew what Georgius was.

On top of that, he had gained two new mysteries.

First, there were indeed two pieces to Georgius and one of those was hidden somewhere.

Second, his parents had come here for Georgius, but…

"Georgius is made from a human being. What fight made that necessary?"

That would be the battle during the Great Kansai Earthquake.

*…Was that so great a battle that they wanted to destroy concepts!?*

Before he could answer his own question, the scene before his eyes changed.

Realizing it would be the underground study, strength filled his gaze. He knew he had returned to the normal world.

"…!?"

But he was wrong.

He saw the blue sky and the mountains in front of him.

*…Where is this?*

He looked into the clear sky.

He saw a white fence and the top of a forest beyond that.

This was a narrow viewing platform built on an elevated cliff in the Okutama mountains.

He sat on a wooden bench and his vision was quite low to the ground.

*…What is this?*

He knew the answer and he spoke that knowledge aloud.

"Is this my mother's attempted double suicide!?"

●

Sayama realized there was a lunch to his left. A large red box contained sausage, pasta salad, croquettes, apple slices, and other colors of food. A large blue box contained rice balls.

He felt the usual pain in his chest.

Without him telling it to, his vision looked down at the lunch.

This was his past self. This gaze belonged to a version of himself much different from now.

The gaze turned around to look at a parked wine-red sedan.

Beyond the car was a two-lane road. The wall-like slope covered by a cement embankment showed the road had been carved out of the mountainside.

The gaze turned back and looked to someone sitting beyond the lunch.

It was a short-haired woman wearing a blue shirt and a long white flared skirt.

She looked back at him with a smile and a tilt of the head. She tilted her head instead of looking down on him.

"What is it, Mikoto? What's the matter?"

Sayama's mind and body froze with fear at the voice he heard.

*…Kh.*

The pain felt like having his lungs squeezed, but…

*…This is…*

"Nothing!"

His past self in the dream happily spoke the same word he forced from the depths of his throat: nothing.

“Let’s eat already,” said his other self.

“Go ahead,” said his mother. “Yes. I actually put real effort into this one.”

His hand quickly reached for a rice ball.

Do these have hamburger meat in them?

Yes.

Aren’t you going to eat any, mom?

You’re eating too fast, Mikoto. I can’t keep up.

C’mon, eat. …You can eat dad’s portion too.

*…Show some tact, child.*

But despite his thought, he saw his mother smile.

He had not thought anything of the smile at the time, but he now knew what it meant.

He gave a long mental sigh and wiped away his unseen sweat.

*…Why am I seeing my past? Does my subconscious have a humiliation fetish?*

He could make a guess. When the information on Georgius had left, the information inside his own mind must have been partially dragged out.

But if he allowed that information to be fully drawn out…

*…This past may be externally stored in writing and vanish inside me.*

That would erase one of the memories that plagued his chest.

*…How about it?*

If he erased the memory, he would have an easier time in the future. Most likely, his mother would no longer give him chest pains and he would not worry Shinjou as much.

This was probably his one and only chance at this.

*…This may be a sort of reward.*

This may have been thanks for making it this far and attempting to learn what was written here.

As he thought through it logically, he saw a certain moment begin.

This was the final moment.

“…”

The owner of the gaze, that young Sayama, held a thermos lid his mother had given him.

It contained orange juice chilled with ice and the young Sayama rejoiced that it contained three whole pieces of ice.

“Mom, I can see the bottom through the i-…”

As soon as he turned around, he saw darkness.

That darkness made his mind gasp along with his past self.

He caught a brief glimpse of the blue sky and then something blue covered him. It was his mother’s clothes and body.

Something that kept him from breathing was pressed down on him by something heavy.

That weight prevented him from moving or breathing.

He tried to say so, but it was so sudden that his lips only trembled and refused to move properly.

“M-…”

He heard his young self’s voice.

“Mom!!”

His body used up all of its air for that shout.

A moment later, his vision grew bright and the blue cloth of his mother’s clothing lifted slightly.

“…!”

He saw his mother’s face.

With the blue sky in the background, the ends of her eyebrows were lowered as if it say nothing could change this but not to worry about it.

*…Why are you smiling!?*

“Don’t worry.”

He heard his mother’s faintly shrill voice.

“Next time you call for me, it will surely be in a new world.”

Her hands rose toward his face.

“…!!”

She leaned toward him, he took a breath, and he passed out.

At the same time, his present self fell into darkness. He fell into pure black where nothing could be seen.

But even as his vision grew dark, the pain in his chest did not vanish.

The pain felt like his heart was being squeezed and he could not fight it no matter how much strength he gathered.

A weight emptied his mind until he could not even think about the pain.

And as the pain filled his entire body, he thought.

*…When I later woke in the hospital, I learned that my mother had killed herself with a blade.*

He had heard a fair bit of speculation. Some wondered if his mother had thought he had suffocated when he had passed out. Others wondered if she had known he was not dead but had been unable to go through with killing him as well.

All he knew for sure was that he had shed no tears for the mother inside that coffin.

His only thought had been “Why?”

About a decade had passed since then.

During those ten years, the pain had grown and he had tried to forget.

And now a chance had come. If he did nothing now, he could part ways with this memory and its pain. The memory itself would be drawn out of him.

It would become a written record and it would be stripped from his brain in the process.

He had recalled that final memory of his mother countless times, but it would instead spin round and round in that astronomical model.

*…And I will have an easier life.*

That was fine. It would be good for the Leviathan Road, good for his own future, and good for Shinjou.

But even as he thought that, he heard a voice.

“A terrible idea.”

The voice rejected his thoughts.

“Don’t you think, Shinjou-kun?”

When the voice called the name of the one most important to him, he realized it was his own voice.

*…Why?*

The answer was simple. Even as his memory was drawn from him, he was waking up.

His subconscious – that undeniably honest part of himself – was speaking to him.

“Doesn’t it sound like a terrible idea? After all, Shinjou-kun is searching for the past and she would never think to erase the result, regardless of what that result is. And Kazami will never forget that

Izumo was injured. The same goes for everyone else. They will never erase the loss of their loved ones. …So will I alone erase it?"

He spoke back to his own question.

*…Yes, but I am me and they are them. What is wrong with it?*

"Is that so?" he asked himself. "Will I be able to bear it if I have lost my own past? When Shinjou-kun is embracing her past even as she so beautifully grieves, will I not be there with her? Do you know what that is called?"

*…Why not call it a privilege? A privilege earned by reaching this place?*

He heard a bitter laugh.

"Coming here was my selfish decision. No one will give me a privilege for that. That is called…"

*…Cowardice.*

His mind answered his subconscious.

After a pause, his subconscious spoke.

"Do you understand? No, I know you understand. After all…"

Both Sayamas spoke at once.

"I know myself better than anyone else in the world. And the one who knows me second best is Shinjou-kun."

After another pause, both conscious and subconscious suddenly shouted out.

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled…carrots!! Damn, you kept up wonderfully, other me! That's me for you!"

Confident that his mind had gathered as one, he thought.

"Yes," he began. "I had forgotten, but I am a human who stands above god. So no matter what handicap or past I may hold, I can continue upwards, unlike the common people below me. …Ergo, I need no helping hand. Having Shinjou-kun help me through the pain is my greatest happiness."

"Then hurry," said his subconscious. "Your past is being dragged out."

Sure enough, his surroundings were filling with light.

He was waking.

If he did nothing, he would fully wake and he would likely find that final memory of his mother rotating in a circle.

He had to stop it.

*…But how?*

The answer reached his body.

Someone placed their hand on the back of his left hand which he could not clench into a fist.

He did not know whose hand it was. Did it come from his memories, was it his own hand, or was it an illusion?

Regardless, he spread his unseen hand in the darkness. He held it before his eyes, spread the fingers, and thrust it into the blackness as if clawing at it.

"I heard that a will can overcome all else."

He was alone.

"I will likely always be alone."

Even if someone stood by his side…

"We will never fully overlap. After all, only I can do that."

But he mouthed the name of the person he cared most for.

"Nevertheless, I want to be with you. …Surely that will lead me to my answer. That will tell me why I had Team Leviathan disband."

His mind nodded and gathered strength in his left hand.

"I no longer have any reason to deny the past or to reject my pain. So cry out in pain, my body. Enduring that is what allows me to rise above all others. And as I do, I will go ahead. I will set an example for all those dragging around the pain of the past and will tell them this: If I am worth following, then go ahead. Yes, that is my role!"

He cried out.

"The surname Sayama indicates a villain! …And that villain has a single desire. If all is chaos and I stand above god, then it is not light that I desire. I desire…"

Strength filled his right hand.

He still doubted he could throw a punch, but he managed to fully clench the fingers in the darkness.

All five fingers constricted into a fully-formed fist.

He felt the memory clenched inside that fist and he raised his voice.

"Let there be strength!!"

His mind struck the darkness before his eyes and he had a thought.

*…What is Shinjou-kun doing right now?*

# Chapter 21

## “In the Past”

On the hill where the past flutters through the air
The flower petals last a mere thirty years

●

Shinjou was in a black and white space.

The white was the color of the walls and ceiling while the black was the color of the chairs and tables.

Several tables were lined up in a ten square meter room.

It was a cafeteria.

The wooden clock on the wall said it was half past seven, but only the heat of an early dinner remained in the room.

The food had been eaten at six and the faint scent of spices hung in the air.

Several tapestries were lined up to either side of the clock.

The pictures embroidered on them had been made by the children. They started with story of creation and continued up to the beginning of the current age.

Each tapestry had a single image, but the children must have hung them up as they liked because the order was completely wrong.

"That's adorable."

One image showed a man and woman living in a garden, but the very next one showed the Virgin Mary holding her child, and that was followed by a snake, a flood, and a tower. The very last picture was a shepherd looking up into the starry sky.

It almost looked like a test to see if you could put them in order, but Shinjou remembered this was not a church and so it was not the place to teach the children those things.

*Whoever was in charge must just let the kids do what they want,* she guessed.

She doubted the woman who ran the place had created that policy, so it had likely been the decision of someone from an older time.

*...There must have been someone here as terribly arbitrary as Sayama-kun and the others.*

She then looked to the pile of documents on the table in front of her.

The pile included albums, sketchbooks, and notebooks.

Each of them had the same name on them.

"Shinjou Yukio."

She had found these without much difficulty.

After the director had calmed her from her tears, she had told the woman why she had been searching for the orphanage.

The woman had invited her in and said the following.

“I was left in charge of this orphanage a while after it was moved here. I hear a lot of registers and other documents were lost when the old building collapsed, but the things left by the graduates were in the previous director’s storehouse, which survived. How about we look through there?”

She had ended up going through all the albums and such piled up in the back of the storehouse.

After finishing their dinner, the orphans had said they would help, but Shinjou had politely turned them down.

*…I want to do this on my own.*

The name she was looking for had appeared suddenly.

She now had Shinjou Yukio’s albums as well as her notebooks, reports, printouts, and report cards from school. The given dates ended at 1976.

The records for that final year said she was fifteen in 1976 and the records in Izumo UCAT had said Shinjou Yukio was born in 1960, so it added up.

This was actually her.

After learning that, she had taken those documents to the cafeteria.

She had not forgotten to call UCAT while the director made her a light dinner of toast and such.

Hiba had answered and she had told him the time of her train home and the orphanage’s address. He said Harakawa’s mother had collapsed and she was worried, but there was nothing she could do.

*…I just hope nothing bad happens.*

With that thought, she took a quiet breath and reached for the pile of documents.

First, she picked up an album.

●

All of a sudden, Shinjou saw several photographs depicting moments from the past.

The photographs pasted in the album showed a certain girl.

She had a strong-willed look to her and she could be seen playing in the yard of the old orphanage, studying in one of its rooms, and dressed in a bird-like costume for some kind of festival.

As the date advanced, her hair grew longer and she wore a red ribbon in her hair by the time she was wearing a middle school uniform.

*…Does she look like me?*

She was not sure and she could not find anything in the photos to connect the girl to her.

However, she saw the girl helping the younger children change or otherwise taking charge more often as time went on.

She also saw the girl smile. Sometimes it was a powerful smile and other times it was a weak one.

In one photograph, she was showing off a flute she had probably gotten in middle school. In another one, Shinjou saw the flute's brown bag sticking out of her rectangular leather bag.

But Shinjou noticed something.

*…It's gone?*

At what Shinjou guessed was her shift up to the third year, the flute's bag vanished from the leather bag.

She also noticed a white scrape along the surface of the leather bag.

She did not know what had happened, but the girl's smile looked troubled as she knitted.

That was the final school year in the album.

The date to the side of the photo was November 1975. In December, the girl wore a white stole as she sang something in a large room lit only by candles.

It was likely a scene from Christmas.

*She was younger than I am now,* thought Shinjou. But at the same time…

*…This is from thirty years ago.*

終わりのクロニクル

She reached toward the photograph, but no matter how gently she touched it, she could not reach the girl in the past.

The girl would not answer if she asked if she was her mother.

As she approached the end of the album, she found some photographs of the girl's middle school graduation.

Shinjou noticed a bandage on the girl's cheek in the photograph on the way back to the church after the graduation. The paper tube holding her diploma was bent as well.

*…But her smile is back.*

The cliff by the old orphanage's yard had a nice view of Sakai and it was filled with cherry blossoms.

Below the falling cherry blossoms, the girl smiled with the bandage on her cheek and the bent paper tube in her hand.

"Good."

For some reason, Shinjou felt she had a bit of an understanding of the girl.

*…She must have been a good person.*

She had hidden thoughts, she tried to solve everything herself, and she would smile.

The word "alone" appeared in Shinjou's mind, but she doubted that was entirely wrong.

"…"

She flipped to the final page which contained a single large photograph.

Cherry blossom petals danced through the air in front of the old orphanage's entrance.

Below a blue sky, Shinjou Yukio stood in front of the open gate. She wore a light blue windbreaker and white jeans and she held a large white travel bag in one hand. And…

"She's smiling…but it's the weak smile."

She was likely leaving the orphanage.

Shinjou realized the girl had a national railway envelope for a train ticket in her breast pocket.

After quickly flipping through the album and checking the other albums, she confirmed something.

*…There isn't a single picture of her crying. It's always that proud smile or that weak one.*

That was enough to imagine what kind of person she had been.

In that unreachable past, she had worked alone when she was at school, when she was in the orphanage, when she was dealing with her classmates, and when she was helping the younger children.

Shinjou had a sudden thought about that younger girl in the photographs who shared her family name.

*…What if she was my mother?*

She thought about it, considered it from a number of angles, and shook her head.

*…The odds of that aren't very good.*

Needless to say, the girl was female. If she had married, her family name would have changed. As the push for equal rights between the sexes had grown, the law had changed to say a woman could use either name after marriage, but that had only happened in the mid-nineties. Even in the present day, very few people did so and she would have likely married in her twenties which would have been during the eighties.

The odds of her being Shinjou's mother were low.

That thought filled her stomach with pain. The stomachache she always felt at the end of the month was rearing its ugly head due to stress.

So for the moment, she spoke aloud what she needed to investigate here.

"Where did she go after leaving here?"

If the orphanage kept records of their plans, she would know where the girl had gone. Following that trail would likely lead her to the answer and that might let her give up for the time being.

Curious, she searched through the documents and found a printout related to her future plans.

The straw paper had turned brown and it was only a schedule for a meeting about planning for the future, but Shinjou continued searching through the pile that schedule had come from.

"Here it is."

She found a form filled in with the girl's tentative plans for the future.

It had a space for the school she wanted to attend and the necessary score for acceptance.

Neat handwriting wrote out a school with Osaka in its name.

"I see. So did she go to a local school?"

If she had survived the Great Kansai Earthquake, she might be able to meet her.

With that faint hope in her heart, Shinjou looked through the document.

The area to explain her choice was filled in with small but clear handwriting.

“I want to go into theology in the future. I would like to use the knowledge I have in that field to help our cultural exchange with other countries. But I have no money for school, so I hope to attend a prefectural school that offers the courses I want.”

*Is that what someone raised in a church would say?* wondered Shinjou even as it made sense to her.

She flipped the document over in case anything was written on the back, but the back was blank.

The form was apparently only for the student’s tentative plans.

“Too bad,” she muttered while preparing to flip the fairly thick paper back over.

But just before she did, she noticed something odd about the form.

“It looks like something else was written here.”

The writing on the front had left indentations in the back, but the indentations at the very top were a complete mess.

She could tell some other school had been written below the one with Osaka in the name.

The girl had written some other school and then erased it.

*…Why?*

Shinjou recalled the girl’s weak smile and guessed she had made that smile while erasing the first school.

Shinjou found herself wanting to know what it had been.

After all, she knew that weak smile.

As if telling the girl to cheer up, she began to move.

“Um…”

She pulled a black binder from her bag and pulled out a piece of tracing paper. She had brought it to hold old documents without damaging them.

She placed the tracing paper on the back of the document and lightly traced over it with the side of some mechanical pencil lead.

The thin tracing paper matched the indentations of the document

and allowed her to bring out the handwriting.

She finished in less than a minute.

It included the second school name as well, so it was hard to read.

Even so, she managed to decipher that handwriting from the past.

The name that had been erased was one Shinjou knew very well.

“Private…Taka-Akita Academy!?”

●

Shinjou reflexively stood at the words she herself had spoken.

The chair scraped across the wooden floor and the director entered through the cafeteria entrance.

Shinjou ran over to the woman, while annoyed that the slippers she wore slowing her down.

“U-um! Are there any more documents on her!?”

Before, she had wanted to pursue her, but that thought was beginning to change.

*…I have to pursue her!!*

As if pulled forward by that thought, she smiled and asked the middle-aged woman in white a question.

“I still don’t know if she was my mother! But I need to know why she tried to go where I am now.”

She thought back to who she had been when she had been alone and who she was now.

“I need to know why she tried to go to the place where I learned to smile.”

A moment later, Shinjou saw the wooden plate hanging by the cafeteria’s entrance.

It gave the orphanage’s name and it was likely a piece recovered from the old building.

*…The Soukou House.*

As soon as she spoke those words in her heart, something seemed to connect inside her.

She thought back on what she had just said.

*…Shinjou Yukio tried to go to Taka-Akita Academy.*

Her heart shouted in denial of those words.

*…No!!*

She took two logical steps to reach a conclusion that was nearly a gamble.

“She…”

Her reasoning linked together and built her confidence as she spoke.

“She must have gone to where I am now!”

The ends of the director’s eyebrows lowered when she heard that.

She seemed to be hesitating and she tilted her head.

“Shinjou-san?” she began. “What makes you so sure of that?”

Shinjou moved back to the table and grabbed the album and the future plans document.

She walked back to the woman, flipped through the pages, and reached the final page and the photograph of the girl leaving.

She held the open album in her left hand and pointed at one point on the photograph with her right hand.

“Look in her breast pocket. See the train ticket? She wouldn’t need a ticket if she was moving somewhere within the Osaka Prefecture or somewhere else nearby. That means she wasn’t going to the school from her tentative plans on this form. I think she had to have gone to the school on the future plans form she actually submitted to her teacher. …And I think that was a school in Tokyo.”

“But where would she have gotten the money for that school?”

The woman brought a troubled hand to her cheek.

“We’re talking about a school in Tokyo…and probably a private one too.”

Shinjou responded with a deep nod.

“Director, you know who built this orphanage, don’t you?”

“Yes, the previous director told me.”

“I will now tell you that name.”

She took a calm, deep breath before answering.

“Soukou.”

The director’s shoulders shook, but Shinjou was not bothered by her surprise. That surprise was only natural.

Shinjou looked to the wooden plate hanging by the cafeteria entrance.

“Yes, it was a Mr. Soukou. …Soukou is written with the characters ‘grass’ and ‘aroma’ and the character for the aroma rising from a plant can be read ‘Kaoru’. …This orphanage was funded by Sayama Kaoru, wasn’t it?”

Once she made it that far, the words kept coming.

"The previous director probably wanted to thank him by directly naming it after him, but I'm sure Sayama-kun's grandfather was embarrassed and refused. That's why the previous director used the name Soukou. And Sayama-kun's grandfather…"

She smiled.

"He was a villain. He would do unbelievable things on the surface, but he would show his true feelings where no one could see. …So if he saw someone hesitating over her future and giving up on what she wanted to do out of consideration for those around her, he would have helped her even if she wasn't his friend's granddaughter."

The director's reaction was to sigh. It was a sigh of relief.

She brought her right hand to her cheek.

"I see."

She slowly looked up and down Shinjou.

"Do you know the man the previous director called Daddy-Long-Legs?"

"Not him himself, but I know a relative of his very well."

"I see," said the woman again.

She held up what was in her hand and held it out at Shinjou's eye level.

"These are the letters the orphanage's graduates sent. We have always made sure to carefully store them since the previous director's time, but I completely forgot we had them in the office. Some of those sent to the previous director survived and…I found them. These are what Shinjou Yukio sent over a decade ago."

The woman held out an old notebook and two letters.

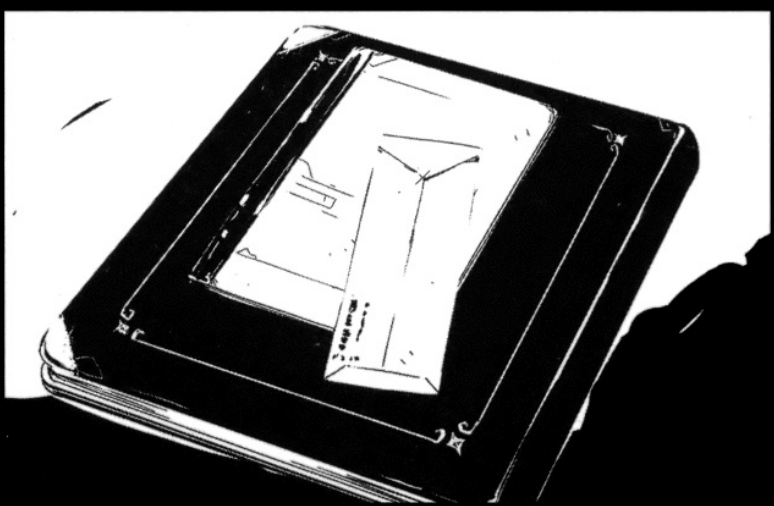
"I believe you should read these."

The woman smiled and nodded.

"Here. This is the entrance to what you seek."

# Chapter 22

## “What Taught Her to Smile”



Because you hoped

●

Alone in the cafeteria, Shinjou stood motionless below the cold lights.

She took a breath and muttered to herself.

“What do I do?”

She knew the answer. She knew exactly what to do, but she needed those words to get her started.

She began to answer those words with her actions.

First, she placed the album in her hands on a nearby table and set the notebook and letters on top of that.

She sat in the chair and took a breath in front of all that writing.

She stretched out a hand, but hesitated as that hand approached the letters.

“It’s too soon for that.”

She picked up the notebook instead.

She gave a silent bow and gently flipped through it.

*…Research on mythology?*

She had expected a diary or something similar, but she had been wrong.

She felt a mixture of disappointment and relief as she readily flipped through the pages.

That girl had grown up with a connection to the Bible and these were the records of her research on the world’s mythologies.

She summed up that most mythologies contained the symbols of dragons and divine tools and she had labeled a hand-drawn map with the spread of different mythologies and their points in common.

It had apparently been a summer research project for her third year of middle school and the final page contained a grade of A+ in faded red ink and a list of sources in Shinjou Yukio’s own handwriting.

“World Mythology Encyclopedia 1 – 11 by Kinugasa Tenkyou.”

Shinjou felt a small tremor in her spine when she read that name.

This girl had been the granddaughter of Shinjou Kaname and assisted by Sayama Kaoru, so what had she thought and hoped for as she read those books in the Kinugasa Library?

Shinjou did not know, but she felt as if she could sense something there. Something she could not put to words welled up within her.

*…It feels like a flame.*

She had similarly thought her heart was burning when she had found this place.

After all, it burned bright, blew through her, and quickly grew.

Pulled by that heat in her thoughts, she closed the notebook.

"…"

She reached for the letters.

The action was much like reaching for the next book in a series when one wanted to know what happened next.

It was a casual and natural action and that was exactly what helped Shinjou realize how she felt.

"Yes. I want to know more."

Hope filled her cheeks with slight heat as she looked at the first envelope.

She did not immediately look inside. She wanted to look at the outside more and more and make it all feel more important.

She checked the date. It was about half a year after the girl had entered high school.

The stamp was an old type not seen anymore.

The address was written in round handwriting using a ballpoint pen.

After making sure there was nothing else on the front or back, she finally gave permission to her curiosity.

She pulled out the letter.

She looked down at the folded and slightly faded paper and she closed her eyes.

"Please let me read you."

With that said, she unfolded that first letter.

She found a photograph held between the folds and many words.

*"It has been a while."*

Shinjou's eyes raced along the paper.

●

*"I have finally gotten used to living in the dorm. Do you see the boy and girl with me in the included photograph? I am not sure if I should call them my friends, but they are always with me.*

*"There's a lot of interesting things about those two, but I will leave it at that since I am not sure if I should talk about some of it*

*yet. At any rate, I very much enjoy being with them.*

*"However, I will tell you this much. Tragically, the girl lost both her parents recently. It was apparently a strange sort of murder, but her situation reminds me of when I lost my parents. Apparently, she is moving out of her house and it will be torn down.*

*"But this means she will be my roommate now. Things are sure to be livelier, but I have never shared a room with someone my own age. I don't know what is going to happen, but I am looking forward to it and I hope her parents can rest in peace."*

●

Shinjou checked the photograph.

Shinjou Yukio's hair was a little longer and she stood below a cherry tree with a pair of classmates.

She was smiling.

And Shinjou recognized the boy and girl standing on either side of her.

*…Those are Sayama-kun's parents.*

She slowly breathed in and read the letter again.

What Shinjou Yukio was unsure if she should talk about was probably Sayama's father.

That meant she had Sayama Kaoru's son by her side.

*…I wonder if Sayama-kun's father had realized the truth?*

She was not sure.

Even if she had realized they both had a connection to Sayama Kaoru, mentioning it could damage their relationship.

*…And she wouldn't want to damage that relationship like that.*

Yukio may not have told Sayama's father that she had been supported by Sayama Kaoru.

Shinjou nodded and reached for the other letter. She checked the postmark on the envelope, but…

"There isn't one?"

There was not. The letter must have been delivered by hand.

Instead, the back of the letter inside contained a date: January 10, 1989.

*That's sixteen years ago,* she muttered in her heart while unfolding the letter.

The flowing handwriting in ballpoint pen began in the same way.

*"It has been a while."*

The words continued.

*"I have been unable to send a letter for a few years now. I apologize if I worried you."*

"Eh?"

Shinjou's question was directed at the individual named Yukio who she had come to know through the various documents.

*...She didn't seem like the kind of person to cut off contact like that.*

She tilted her head, but the next words seemed to answer that confusion.

*"About two years ago, I moved to a new workplace and was unable to contact you from there."*

*...Eh?*

Where had she gone and what had she been doing there? What had her previous workplace been?

The writing seemed to wash away those questions.

*"I am where I want to be now. I am in the best possible place for me."*

Shinjou held her breath and continued reading those words that rejected all complaints and protests.

●

*"Yes, there are people here who need my ability. The job is not exactly difficult, but please know that I am doing my best to work toward peace. And I am making use of what I learned. I worried a lot about the future, but I finally got married. I apologize for waiting so long to tell you, but I wasn't sure how to bring it up. My child is doing well. She was born on December 25 of last year and she is sleeping next to me now."*

"...!?"

Shinjou's entire body shrunk back when she saw the word "child".

*...W-wait a second.*

This was too sudden.

Things had jumped too far ahead from the words "workplace" and "job".

*Um,* she said as she began to think.

If Yukio was her mother, she would have been in UCAT.

That was what Mikoku had told her when they had met at Izumo UCAT a month earlier.

*…My parents were in UCAT.*

Yukio claimed to have moved to a new workplace and that she was working toward peace in her job.

*…Did she join UCAT. And does that mean…she's my mother?*

Was she?

Shinjou did not know. She had to read on to find out.

However, she had read similar things so many times now, but none of it had told her what she wanted.

*…But this time…*

She breathed in.

She tried to fill herself with strength using that breath, but something else filled her instead: shaking.

Her body shook, her shoulders shook, her arms shook, her fingers shook, and the letter shook.

As everything trembled, she focused her mind.

She only had a single chance to read something this important for the first time.

She cleared her mind as if casting aside her body and read the letter to leave no regrets.

She slowly read the words aloud.

"Director, I had considered letting you or our Daddy-Long-Legs name her, but in the end, I did it myself."

Shinjou breathed in and made sure the words she spoke were carved into her mind.

"I want my child to be an energetic, thoughtful, and hardworking person like Yume, one of my first friends. But I don't want this child to be exactly like her, so I gave her a different name. Yume's name includes the character for 'life', so I wanted to give my child a name that will bear, raise, and protect life."

The words practically spilled from Shinjou's mouth and she finally reached the name.

"That name is Sadagiri."

She stopped breathing, but her eyes continued moving.

*…That name hides the character for life within it and I hope it will allow her to face her destiny and cut through any evil that*

*threatens her.*

A broken breath escaped her throat.

Something trailed down her cheek.

She lowered her head and whatever it was fell from about halfway down her cheek.

She did not know what this tear meant. Why was she crying when she was not sad?

Regardless, the tear urged her to read the final line.

“This child has some difficulties regarding her body, but I am sure…”

She took in a shrill breath.

“I am sure she will grow into a wonderful child.”

Her voice no longer formed proper words.

“…!!”

She reflexively stood up.

The chair toppled behind her as she rose, opened her mouth, and leaned forward with her hands on the table.

“————”

She inhaled. She felt like she was swallowing something to endure it, hold it inside, and control herself.

She wrapped her arms around herself.

She tightly held herself and the letter as if to confirm everything about herself.

As if to confirm that she was here.

She trembled and bent over, but she still managed to open her mouth.

“…Mom.”

She spoke a word that she had always used as a mere noun and never to address someone.

Unsure if that word would actually reach anyone, she raised her voice.

“Mom…”

There were still things she did not understand, like her family name and what Yukio had done in UCAT.

However, she knew one thing for sure and she spoke that one thing.

“Mom!”

*My mom was probably in that Osaka battle too,* she thought while

squeezing her own body.

*I'll probably never be able to see her again,* she added.

Regardless, some records remained.

Even if she could never meet her, Shinjou Yukio had existed and there were records of her laughing, worrying, and being with others.

Most of the photographs were when she was younger than Shinjou, but that did not change the fact that she had existed.

And Shinjou had someone she could tell this to. She had someone to speak with about her mother.

*…I…*

She informed that person in her heart.

*…I really do have a mom.*

"She hoped that I would grow into a wonderful child."

*Thank goodness,* she thought.

She repeated that sentiment again and again and took a breath.

With that breath, so much from the past seemed to transform into relief.

"…"

And as she filled with that relief, she felt a certain sensation.

As she stood on her trembling legs, she felt something gently moving down the skin of her inner thighs.

"…?"

She almost felt like something had fallen from her leg, so she bent over.

She looked down at her feet and at the inside of her lower legs visible below her skirt.

"Blood?"

For an instant, she did not know what that blood was.

But a decision in her mind led her to speak aloud what was happening to her.

"My body is developing as a girl…"

The relief in her heart had changed her body's pain and worry into something else.

She was filled with countless conflicting feelings like surprise and relief or tension and relaxation.

*…Now both Sadame and Setsu's bodies are working.*

She collapsed to a sitting position and felt her mind sinking into

darkness.

Her body continued embracing the record of her mother as she sank down to the floor.

“Mom…”

She weakly spoke as she spilled to the floor with a teary smile.

“I’m glad I’m who I am.”

●

It was night and both the moon and stars were visible in the vast night sky.

This was not the city night. This was the blue night sky of the mountains.

A single light was visible below it.

The light was located in front of an abandoned house and storehouse built on land cut out of a mountain slope.

A white light shined in the center of the unmaintained yard.

It came from the handheld fluorescent light held by a boy in a suit.

It spread and illuminated both Sayama and his surroundings.

It was silent, so the only sound was the autumn’s night breeze blowing from the west of the mountain.

That high altitude wind would likely become a north wind before long and it was cold yet not entirely dry.

The wind carried the scents of the forest and it swayed in front of Sayama.

Someone stood in front of him.

“You came a long way, Nijun-kun.”

Sayama raised his light so it covered the other person.

The figure that was illuminated starting with the feet was an elderly man with long white hair and a white coat.

It was Nijun.

He lifted his coat a bit in the gentle breeze.

“How do you like the red shirt under here, Sayama-sama?”

“Wearing red at night is most stylish, Nijun-kun.”

Sayama swung his left hand forward to point at the man with a snap of the sleeve.

“But are you here to keep me from sleeping with my Shinjou-kun body pillow?”

“You can go to sleep if you want, but you know what will happen

then, don't you?"

"Yes," he confirmed with a perfectly serious expression. "I will be in a state of bliss. After all, I will be using a Shinjou-kun body pillow. I cannot use that in the dorm, so-… No, I have Shinjou-kun herself in the dorm, so-… No, no. I can have Shinjou-kun dress up as a pillow and-… No, no, no…"

"Sayama-sama, please focus over here again."

"Ah. You just interrupted my imagination, didn't you!?" shouted Sayama. "The crime of imagination interruption warrants a direct punishment!!"

"Calm down," said Nijun while holding out his palms. "You can see her as soon as you leave the mountains, can't you?"

"Yes, you are right."

He suddenly swung his right hand.

The light flew upwards. The thrown fluorescent light illuminated the area like an especially bright star.

Below it, Sayama slowly shrank down in preparation to move.

"You need to learn that being made to wait can be fun too, Mr. Stylish."

"I have waited long enough already. That is why I had already made my way here last night."

Nijun still had his hands held out to calm Sayama, but a moment later, paper appeared between all of his fingers.

They were charms.

"These charms were sealed inside Izumo UCAT. They temporarily strengthen the human body, but they were sealed because the backlash can be harsh enough to destroy the body afterwards. However, they could not bear to get rid of such a powerful tool because they thought they might need it in the future."

"Let me guess, my father made them. That man clearly did not know how to restrain himself."

By saying that, he weakened his chest pain, even if only a little.

The light began to fall toward the ground between them.

Just before it landed, Sayama asked a question.

"Why did my father need something like that?"

"Testament. For a battle. He had a battle to fight."

Nijun placed the charms in his hands under the opposite arms.

"That battle ten years ago was the last one we could enjoy!!"

With those words, the light struck the ground and broke.

Using the resultant darkness as their cue, two bursts of speed collided.

# Chapter 23

## “The Second Battle”

Leap
Run
And fall

●

The darkness of night filled a forest.

That forest covered the surface of a mountain.

The moon was bright and the sky was bluish, but the pale light of the moon could not penetrate the forest.

The light was stopped by countless layers of branches and leaves, so only shadows fell below.

The bottom of the forest was a dark, steep slope.

Something moved along that slope as if falling.

It was two sounds.

They were both sets of footsteps, but they were complete opposites in one aspect: the space between steps.

One set had five seconds between one footstep and the next.

The other set sounded continuously like a high-tempo performance from a percussion instrument.

The two sets of footsteps used these different intervals to race down the dark mountainside.

Occasionally, a great sound of impact would mix in with them.

The clear and harsh sound would be absorbed by the forest and the footsteps would begin anew.

The one producing the set of footsteps with the long interval spoke while quickly racing through the dark forest.

“Ha ha ha. Keeping up with me at this speed puts you on Hiba-sensei’s level, Nijun-kun.”

The one with the shorter interval replied.

“You’re not bad yourself to move faster than me, Sayama-sama.”

The two of them laughed, rushed forward again, and produced another solid sound.

A break in the forest briefly revealed the sounds.

Below the night sky, a boy in a suit the same color as that sky appeared in the lead.

He was literally leaping.

He would throw his body very nearly horizontally, the bottom of his suit coat would flip up, his tie would flutter upwards, and a few tufts of his hair would dance in the wind as he seemed to glide along the surface of the forested slope.

Some faint sweat had emerged on his brow and his sharp gaze

was focused on the ground below.

However, it could not exactly be called the “ground”.

This was a rocky area.

The many years of wind and rain had eroded the forest’s dirt until countless stones larger than a human were exposed.

The boulders were piled up in a steep slope down toward a valley instead of forming a cliff wall.

From above, it did almost look like a precipice in the forest.

However…

“…”

As Sayama continued his gliding movement through the dark forest, his eyes were focused on that series of rocks.

“When travelling in a place like this, the easiest path is straight down, Nijun-kun.”

Even as he spoke and felt the wind of his rapid descent, he lowered his right leg and bent the knee.

A stone approached below that bent leg.

An instant later, he fired that right leg out from his leaping body. Instead of hitting the top of the boulder, he kicked off the front surface.

He leaped upwards and forwards so he left the slope.

He never fully landed; he only kicked off the stones like a wall.

But that was enough.

His downwards inertia would carry him toward the base of the mountain.

If he did actually land, he would be unable to absorb the inertial weight and damage his leg or trip.

He only had to make sure the speed of his fall did not exceed the speed of his kicks. To do that, he turned his body and adjusted the angle of his jumps as he fell.

Each time he kicked, he would twist his body to make a slight feint and alteration to his trajectory in order to throw off his pursuer. He would also spread out his clothes as an air brake.

He faintly heard a flowing river beyond the wall of stone and earth to his right.

However, he could barely hear it even during the silent night.

It was likely over one hundred meters down below.

As he leaped, Sayama turned back in midair.

“Are you coming, Nijun-kun?”

Someone pursued Sayama as he raced down into the valley.

It was Nijun running through the darkness with the color white flapping around him.

He was an old man in a white coat, but…

“I see you are using a path a normal human could manage. You four really are perfectionists.”

“I am a diligent worker, after all. And I am the best of my brothers when it comes to improving physical ability.”

Nijun raised and lowered his legs while taking the idea of “running” to its extreme and he dashed along a narrow path between the stones.

Charms were floating near the bases of both his legs. They were glowing a bluish-white and discharging some kind of lightning.

“These are divine travel charms. They increase the speed of one’s legs. With these, I need not bother with your acrobatics. I can use the same path as a normal person…”

He added a charm to each hand.

“And still catch up!”

Several charms were floating all around his body, so it looked a lot like armor of acceleration.

Sayama saw the man loudly kick off the ground and sprint. He instantly raced through the narrow mountain path, made each meandering turn on a single heel, and even quickly climbed up or down any chains prepared for hikers on that path.

Whenever he changed direction, his body would break through a thin wall of water vapor.

This produced a sound.

The air roared in response to his acceleration.

He was fast, but Sayama also twisted around.

“I see. Very interesting. But I want to make you try even harder.”

Sayama kicked off the ground, but this time he leaped higher, stronger, and more downward than before.

“Let us see if you can keep up with the same level of speed I used against Hiba-sensei.”

“Ha ha. It is an honor to be treated on the level of 3rd’s destroyer!”

“Yes, you are on the level of a mountain ape.”

Sayama smiled slightly and let gravity pull him down for even longer.

He fell.

As he dropped down through the rocky forest, he spread out his arms to use his suit for speed adjustments and attitude control.

The wind produced by his fall blew up from below. It felt like all the air stored in the depths of the planet was being thrown at him.

*…Ha ha.*

He gave a laugh of joy in his heart.

"Are you having fun, Nijun-kun? Look, you're falling behind. You said you wanted to enjoy yourselves, but was that desire not enough to keep up with this world?"

"Oh, you've said it now."

Nijun altered his posture. He had stood tall as he ran before, but now he leaned forward, bent his elbows at right angles, and swung his arms.

This produced tremendous acceleration.

He instantly broke through a wall of exploding water vapor and did not stop.

He raced through the meandering path between the rocks so quickly it looked like time-lapse footage.

"Ohhh!"

He let out a roar and did not let up on his acceleration even as a mist of overheating rose from his body.

"Continuation brings strength!!"

Sayama heard that shout and saw Nijun charge down the mountain toward him.

The man rotated his right arm.

"Sayama-sama! Prepare yourself! To be blunt, I might kill you!"

"Ha ha ha. That is blunt indeed. I like it. But…"

Sayama kicked at the ground just before Nijun caught up.

"I believe you will be seeing nothing but darkness."

With that, he leaped out into the darkness.

He leaped down the steep slope spread out before his eyes.

●

After Sayama leaped into the darkness ahead, Nijun entered the forest covering that steep slope.

The forest continued, but this was a very steep spot midway up the mountain. Sticking a hand out to the side was enough to touch the ground.

To someone running down from above, it was nearly a straight drop.

However, Nijun saw his enemy in the darkness. That enemy showed no fear of the steep angle.

As Nijun ran between the rocks, Sayama soared through the air about ten meters ahead.

His dark blue clothing was hard to make out in the dark forest, so Nijun held a single charm in front of his eyes.

“A dark travel charm to assist my vision.”

The charm glowed and grew transparent. It resembled a panel of glass and the outer edges shined a bluish-white.

The charm remained fixed in front of his eyes and it showed the scene before him sans the darkness.

He saw Sayama truly leaping through the air.

The boy kicked off the rocks and kicked off the right or left cliff face to match the corners of the mountain path. Whenever the path moved sharply downwards, he would kick off an outcropping of the right or left cliff face from below, spin around in midair, and fall down along with the path.

His movements resembled those of a snowboarder.

His jumping technique transferred his falling speed into mobility and sent him on through the darkness.

His vision would be no different from a normal person’s, so there was only one way he could see through the darkness like this.

“Have you memorized this mountain?”

Had he learned where to step while training in the mountain with Hiba Ryuutetsu?

…*No.*

Nijun corrected himself. Sayama had been running like this ever since leaving Kinugasa’s house.

The boy knew the path all the way to that house he had only visited once. He was replaying his memories of the way up to tell him where to step on the reverse route back down.

It was only natural that he had chosen to take the lead.

If he had not, they would not have taken the path he knew.

“I see.”

Nijun began to run even faster.

The wind from behind could no longer keep up and a delayed surge of air appeared several meters behind him.

The rocky ground behind him crumbled and was blown away, but he did not slow.

He pursued Sayama as the boy spun about in midair on his falling pathway.

He heard the boy laugh.

Sayama kicked off a thick root on an almost perfectly vertical portion of the left slope and he turned toward Nijun.

“That is a nice pace, Nijun-kun.”

Nijun did not reply. He no longer wasted any of his breath on a conversation.

“…!”

He ran. He accurately slipped between boulders, did not skip a single one of the steps made from dirt covering tree roots, and focused entirely on running.

He was catching up.

Seeing a chance, he threw an open-hand jab toward Sayama’s back.

Sayama twisted in midair and avoided it.

To respond, the boy prepared to throw his left fist.

In that instant, Nijun activated his fixed concept.

- **—Only truth remains.**

Sayama’s left arm stopped.

●

Sayama had thrown his left arm to prepare for his real attack, but it stopped.

He had not stopped it himself and it had not hit anything.

The motion had simply stopped.

“What?”

“It is simple, Sayama-sama. My concept prevents the creation of any and all lies.”

Sayama saw Nijun swing his right arm toward him.

A charm flew from that hand and he clenched his fist.

It was an acceleration charm, so the man's arm was wrapped in acceleration and seemed to shoot forward.

The fist struck the arm Sayama had raised in defense.

A tremendous sound filled the air.

"…!"

Sayama was in midair, so he was blown backwards.

*…He looks slender, but that was quite a powerful blow!*

Sayama flipped around as he flew and attempted to correct his position.

However, Nijun caught up to him, so he tried to swing his body leftward and away.

"…"

He could not move, but Nijun laughed as if that motionless was perfectly normal.

"Ha ha. You cannot make any feints in this world. All fakes, tricks, and deceptions are made impossible! …This should be a fatal blow to your favorite tactics."

Nijun threw his fist and Sayama guarded.

The man's right fist hit the center of his crossed arms, but he could not stop the force of the blow and his arms struck his chest.

His breastbone creaked and his entire body flew backwards a moment later.

As he trembled from the impact, Sayama saw Nijun continue to move.

The man sent an acceleration charm to his right elbow and quickly raised his right arm once more.

He sent out another charm and approached for a re-accelerated strike.

The charm activated, the used charms scattered like feathers, and he pursued Sayama.

"…!"

He sent a chain of attacks.

Charm after charm flew and impact after impact reached the boy in midair.

The fifth hit knocked his guarding arms upwards, the seventh struck his chest, and the eighth drove into his gut.

*…!* He felt the crushing of his flesh and the creaking of his bones.

A light appeared from his chest.

It was the blue philosopher's stone pendant that the development department had given him for defense.

However…

"How impudent."

Nijun reached out his right hand and tore the pendant's chain.

Just as the blue vanished into the darkness, Sayama began to move.

He reached out both arms and wrapped them around the right arm Nijun had used to grab the pendant.

He instantly stretched his hands to the man's shoulder and chest. He grabbed hold of the man with one hand deep inside the white coat.

"Success!"

But despite Sayama's shout, Nijun forcibly tore him away.

That eliminated the connection between them, and…

"…!!"

Sayama swung his right leg through the air. This was the beginning of a real kick and not a feint.

Nijun leaped and quickly pulled back his right leg for a straight kick in response.

His counterattack could easily rupture an internal organ if it hit.

The attacks flew and Nijun's was faster.

However…

"Well done!"

Sayama continued swinging his right leg regardless and his kick flew toward its intended target.

That target was the rapidly approaching sole of Nijun's shoe.

It hit.

●

Nijun felt his vision waver.

The visual footage from his eyes told him his speed had slowed slightly.

This was due to an accurate kick to the sole of his right foot as he kicked it straight out.

"…Kh."

As he finished his kick, he realized that very kick had launched

Sayama far from him.

*…Damn!*

Sayama had not used a feint. From the very beginning, he had intended to jump back by kicking off of Nijun's kick.

Mistaking it for an attack and kicking back instead of ignoring it had been Nijun's error.

*…That was because we had just finished exchanging attacks.*

He had assumed there would be no feints or lies.

But attack had not been Sayama's only option.

Nijun had been outdone under the effects of his own concept.

Soon, Sayama was five meters away in the darkness.

However, there was a hole beyond the darkness the boy had jumped into.

The forest ended and that hole gave a view of the night sky and a path to up to a ridge.

The ridge was a water divide.

Both sides of the steep slope had been worn away and a stony path only wide enough for one person continued for about fifteen meters.

The ridge was sloped downwards, but the angle was very shallow.

Another forest awaited beyond the ridge.

Nijun realized that Sayama could not build up his speed along that fifteen meter tightrope of rock.

To ensure he did not sprain his ankle when he landed, he would need to slow down before leaving the forest.

*…If I catch up to him there, I can make up for kicking him away!*

If he collided with Sayama once the boy slowed down, even an open-hand jab could pierce through his body.

Knowing his victory was assured, Nijun spoke aloud to the boy in the air ahead of him.

"Prepare yourself!"

He threw a flying kick toward Sayama's back.

However, Nijun saw something other than the boy's back up ahead.

He saw empty air.

"He dodged it!?"

*Where is he?* he wondered before finding his target in an instant.

He was up and to the left. Sayama had kicked off the slope,

flipped around, and arrived far above Nijun's head.

Was he trying to leap all the way across those fifteen meters?

"What?"

He just about asked how that was possible, but the boy's movements stopped him.

Sayama maintained his momentum as he ran up the left side of the cliff and kicked forcefully off the highest point.

"We have arrived in my home ground now. Yes. I would always come down from above and this water divide is where Hiba-sensei would catch up and throw me off the cliff."

So…

"I developed a means of jumping over this water divide while watching my mountain ape teacher down below."

Sayama leaped as he spoke. He used all of his accumulated acceleration and all of his strength to leap from the top of the eight meter cliff, cross the water divide, and reach the forest on the other side.

"During the day, the wind up here is too strong to make a stable jump, but I should be able to make a decent flight during the night. …I thank you for giving me this fun opportunity, Nijun-kun."

Nijun ran out below the night sky as he listened to Sayama.

He used all of his jumping strength to soar high in a flying kick pose, but it was still too low. He would never reach the boy in a suit soaring overhead.

"Are you having fun, Nijun-kun?"

Sayama spread his arms as if to cover the night sky and his suit coat spread out in the air. He swung his arms like a symphony conductor, swayed his body, and used the slight wind for attitude control.

Nijun clenched his teeth.

"I," he began with a tremor in his voice. "I am so jealous."

"Yearning for something is a truly enjoyable thing, Nijun-kun. …As is being yearned for."

Nijun landed before he could respond.

He was in the center of the water divide. A great impact reached his legs as they slammed into the rock and sent stone fragments flying, but 7th-Gear's combat life forms were made sturdily enough to survive falling from the sky. He would not break from this.

A moment later, he leaned forward and accelerated.

He ran straight across the water divide.

As he ran, he felt mocked. The boy had taken the lead this entire time, had taken advantage of his fixed concept, and was now flying by overhead to avoid him.

So…

"This isn't over!!"

Nijun ran.

Just as he was about to reach the forest past the water divide, he finally caught up to Sayama who leaped overhead.

Sayama's trajectory would take him about five meters into the forest and he likely intended to kick off the rocky area there to begin his acceleration anew.

Nijun raced forward to arrive ahead of the boy and launch a counterattack.

He knew this would settle the battle. His heart cried that it was over.

*…Is it over already?*

To be honest, this ending disappointed him. He had used his full speed and had his fixed concept used against him, but it annoyed him to say that he had never actually been in any danger.

He wanted to use his full strength and yet lose.

He did want to give this world the Concept Core. He had seen this world with Chao and his brothers in the approximately sixty years since his birth and he did have a general desire to hand it over.

He had enjoyed his life, but it seemed that was far from what the people of 7th-Gear had desired.

For those people who had become gods by perfecting mankind, anything normal or average was nothing new.

They had been the greatest and ultimate human race.

They had fundamentally surpassed all others in martial arts, physical durability, and speed.

Their lives would never be in any danger even without using any concepts.

That was why they felt no despair. If they despaired anything it was having Nijun's body destroyed for nothing. It was having the Concept Core destroyed without accepting this world as entertaining.

That time was drawing near. He had been aging regardless, but the burden of all the powerful charms he had used this night was accelerating the strain in his body.

*…I beg you.*

Nijun silently pleaded to Sayama as he ran and leaped through the forest.

*…Give us a meaningful ending.*

"We want to know that our power is not enough in this world."

That was their desire.

"That is the sort of world 7th-Gear yearns for!"

He leaped into the darkness of the forest as if leaving his words behind.

He switched from running to leaping in order to reach Sayama's landing point.

His goal was a flat rocky area at the base of a tree facing a cliff.

He landed in an instant. His legs absorbed the shock and he took a step.

He turned toward Sayama who was now approaching from behind.

He had one chance and that chance was this very instant.

He would launch a counterattack on Sayama who flew this way to kick off the rocky area.

The boy soared through the air with his suit coat spread out behind him.

He had already passed below the tree branches on his way down, so he could not grab a branch to throw off the timing of Nijun's attack.

Nijun had a single possible attack: a reverse roundhouse kick thrown as he turned around.

"…!!"

He rotated his right leg backwards, raised the heel, and swung it like a log.

He used a charm to accelerate this reverse roundhouse kick.

If it hit, inertia would bend Sayama's body around it and rupture his organs.

He sent his strength racing toward the falling boy and his right leg soared through the air.

"…?"

But that was all.

His rotating leg cut through empty air and turned him back around.

The strike had not hit Sayama.

*Why?* he wondered, but he found his answer when he looked over his shoulder.

He saw Sayama, but the boy was not standing right in front of him or standing on the ground.

For some reason, he was standing motionless in midair.

●

Sayama looked down at Nijun from midair.

After the roundhouse kick, the man was wide open.

"You were too low to grab a branch, so how?"

The answer was simple.

Sayama showed off his raised left hand.

The hand held something in the darkness.

It was a rope.

The old rope dangled down with the end in tatters.

This was the rope he had once used to hang Hiba Ryuutetsu.

However, simply grabbing that rope could not have stopped him. Either his grip would have lost to inertia and it would have slipped from his grasp or the old rope would have snapped.

But Nijun seemed to have realized what Sayama's answer was.

"You used that rope to make a feint?" he asked blankly.

"Yes," confirmed Sayama, satisfied that the man had given a good answer. "The feint was stopped, so I stopped as well. I once hung Hiba-sensei with this rope, but it proved surprisingly useful. I am glad I checked on it on the way up."

He stood in midair holding the rope and he tilted his head while looking down at Nijun.

"What a curious concept," he began. "What just happened here? Did I make a feint or was my feint stopped? Perhaps this is what you call a paradox. Regardless, I was lucky that it acted in my favor."

With that, he swung his body and let go of the rope.

He jumped down.

He landed on the rocky area directly in front of Nijun. They were within arm's reach of each other.

As soon as he landed, Nijun took action.

He must not have had time to activate a charm because he began a left roundhouse kick from the pose his reverse roundhouse kick had left him in.

As he did, Sayama sank down low and muttered something.

“Too slow, Nijun-kun.”

The boy spread his suit coat and Nijun shouted the name of what surrounded the edges of his exposed vest.

“Acceleration charms!?”

Inside the suit, the charms Nijun had been using glowed and floated on the back of the waist and the sides.

“But how!?”

“Oh, that one is easy.”

*What a pain,* thought Sayama as he answered and sent the bottom of his suit fluttering behind him.

“Lies do not work in this space, correct? So I blatantly picked your pocket when grabbing at your arms. I even gave a clear announcement of my success.”

“…!”

Nijun’s eyes opened wide in surprise, but he had clearly not trained enough if this was enough to shock him.

*How about I give him some training right now?* thought Sayama as he sent his body toward the man at high speed.

“Listen.”

He swung his right fist and struck Nijun’s gut.

Without stopping the impact or acceleration and without stopping Nijun’s body from rising into the air, Sayama stepped forward.

“Nijun-kun, you do not trust me enough. That is why you have failed. …It is truly regrettable. So to deepen our understanding of each other, how about we have some fun together?”

With that, Sayama grabbed Nijun and leaped into the empty air behind him.

He jumped straight off the cliff.

“Sayama-sama!?”

“Is something the matter?”

He casually replied in the empty night air, kicked Nijun downwards, and looked in that same direction.

A ravine lay below.

It was at least a few dozen meters deep and it was too dark to see the bottom.

Nijun fell face up along the cliff face and Sayama slammed both his feet down on the man's stomach.

He jabbed his heels into the man, pressed down, lowered his hips, and spoke.

"Nijun-kun. There are three kinds of fun I have never had a chance to do in these mountains."

Their falling speed increased, the cliff face raced upwards beside them, and they fell into a space the moonlight barely reached.

As they fell, Sayama held Nijun down with his feet and raised three fingers on his left hand.

"First, I have never played a multiplayer handheld game with Shinjou-kun in the mountains."

As for the second…

"I have never played shiritori with Shinjou-kun in the mountains.

He continued on to the third.

"And the third, Nijun-kun? I have never surfed in the mountains."

The instant he finished speaking, Nijun's upside-down form slammed into the cliff face.

"…!!"

Sayama rode on Nijun as they fell down the cliff face.

His body tried to bounce off the rock, but Sayama held him down with his heels and forced him to slalom.

The boy surfed down the cliff face and he shouted into the darkness down below that was now straight ahead.

"Ha ha ha. No wave is bigger than this. …Well? Are you having fun now!?"

He raised his voice.

"Answer me! I am trying to provide entertainment!"

●

Nijun thought as his back slid down the cliff face.

*…My concept is no use here.*

He held his breath and bounced up off the rock.

*…My strength and techniques are of no help.*

He was pressed back against the cliff and he was surfed on.

*…My body will not last much longer.*

He would likely be destroyed before reaching the bottom of the ravine.

In that case, he had to make up his mind now.

And so he moved. He squeezed out the very last of his strength and tried to resist.

“Sayama-sama! I cannot let you enjoy this more than me!”

He forced his body up and kicked off the cliff face.

He pushed Sayama up and toward the cliff and threw himself down toward the empty ravine.

They instantly moved five meters apart and that gap slowly continued to grow.

“Ha ha! How about that!? You can’t keep it up from this far away!!”

Nijun saw Sayama place his feet on the cliff face and begin to run down.

But Nijun spoke to the boy who had outdone everything he had.

“I am the one that will determine my end! I will outdo you here!! You may have twisted everything in your favor as Team Leviathan’s negotiator, but I will outdo you in the end!”

Nijun brought a hand to his neck.

He pulled back a hand for a karate chop and prepared to bring about his own end.

This was his way of outdoing Sayama.

But would this ending send the Concept Core to Low-Gear?

*…Will I be satisfied with an end that ruins Sayama-sama’s plans?*

Once he finished thinking, he heard a voice.

Sayama’s clear voice reached him from above.

“Are you sure that will not be a lie if you say it again?”

Nijun tried to respond by saying he was having fun.

However…

“…”

He found himself unable to speak in this space of no lies.

And he heard Sayama speak instead.

“Okay,” the boy began. “I will be right there to finish this.”

*Impossible,* thought Nijun. *He can’t reach me even if he jumps now.*

But he heard Sayama continue to speak as they both fell.

He began with a question.

“How about I sum up the situation, Nijun-kun?”

The man listened to him.

“You were lying about trying to kill yourself, weren’t you?”

And…

“You wanted me to let down my guard. Then when I approached you, you would use your other hand to cut me down. That was the truth here, wasn’t it?”

Nijun realized what Sayama was doing, so he opened his mouth.

He hesitated but managed a loud voice.

“You saw straight through me!! This suicide attempt was a feint!”

A moment later, his body stopped for just an instant as he fell a bit away from the cliff face.

His momentum from jumping away was gone, so he simply fell.

The feint disguised as suicide had been rejected.

The very next moment, he saw Sayama fall from above while surrounded by new acceleration charms.

He twisted his body and sent his right leg toward the man’s chest.

Nijun prepared his hand to strike back and make his previous statement the truth.

*…Is this the end?*

“Ah,” he muttered. “Such fun!!”

With that shout, he fell into the darkness and swung a rapid karate chop toward Sayama.

At the same time, he remembered what Sayama had said before plunging into the depths of the forest.

*…You will be seeing nothing but darkness.*

He laughed in his heart. It was a loud laugh and he hoped that it would reach his brothers.

He laughed louder and louder.

He had never stood a chance from the very beginning.

And so he spoke from his heart.

“This world is what I have yearned for!!”

As his shout came to an end, their attacks crossed and his entire being fell into darkness.

# Chapter 24

## “Resumed Reunion”

Why?
You ask

●

A sloped road ran between a cement-covered slope and a row of dark houses.

The road was lit by scattered streetlights and someone ran down that road.

It was Shinjou with her long black hair swaying behind her and her backpack bouncing up and down on her back.

The sound of her shoes on the ground was light and some hesitation would occasionally show itself in her pace.

She stumbled a little and smiled bitterly.

“Am I too worried?”

Not long had passed since she had collapsed and passed out in the orphanage cafeteria.

She had woken in the infirmary, changed clothes, and received a variety of things from the director. Afterwards, she had been overcome by weariness.

She had known she could not, but she had given in to the exhaustion, slept, and found it was 9:30 when she woke.

The bullet train had already left, but the bleeding had stopped and she knew she could move.

She had asked the director to check the train schedule and had learned the next train to Tokyo was a 10:22 sleeper train from Shin-Osaka Station.

She had called and learned that train was full, but another one with an opening was leaving Osaka Station at midnight.

After asking for a reservation on that train, she had left the orphanage.

She had said goodbye to the director, called to thank the woman at the church who had helped her, and even remembered to call Sibyl and Hiba at UCAT to tell them she would not be back until the following morning.

When leaving the orphanage, she had made a promise that she intended to keep.

“I’ll come back to visit sometime.”

She wanted to visit again soon.

That was partially to see the documents she had not managed to see today, but…

*…What will Sayama-kun say when he finds out?*

Sayama's father had also been an orphan who was taken in by his grandfather.

She guessed Sayama's grandfather had owned orphanages like this one across Japan.

*…For the children who lost their parents in the war, in the Concept War, or during post-war retribution.*

As she walked, she looked down at the white plastic bag in her left hand.

It contained the sweets the director had given her. They were meant to serve the guests at the orphanage's cultural festival in November, but the woman had said it would be wrong not to give her anything.

"Sakai's famous 'Xavier Watches Over Us'."

The box had a picture of sweets shaped in a realistic depiction of a saint.

She felt like it was looking at her, so she looked away and noticed the IAI logo on the corner of the box.

*…What is that company doing?*

But then she took a breath.

"Heh heh."

A laugh escaped her lips.

*…What will Sayama-kun say?"*

When she told him she had found her mother and that her girl side was working now…

"Will he rejoice and praise me?"

But then doubt filled her expression and her shoulders drooped.

"I'm sure something bad will happen. He'll probably want to make a poster or body pillow to commemorate the occasion."

*It's possible he's already made that kind of thing,* she thought. *He's probably outdone anything a normal person could imagine.*

"But," she said while bringing her right hand to her cheek. "If my actual body is working, he won't have to rely on weird, perverted replicas."

Her imagination continued from there, but her face grew red and she sped up.

To distract herself from her own imagining of the future, she recalled a certain fact.

Sayama had given her an envelope.

"He said he wanted me to read the letter once I found my past, didn't he?"

She reached into her bag and quickly managed to pull out the envelope.

Still walking, she returned the bag to her back and opened the envelope while listening to the rustling of the plastic bag in her left hand.

She pulled out the first of two white pieces of stationery.

She unfolded it and read the beginning of the text.

"Dear Shinjou-kun. Ahh, you are as stimulating as the ripples covering the sea at night."

She thought for a moment and skipped past the first page without reading it.

But after another moment, she sighed.

"I guess that's being a little insincere."

His intentions were good and she enjoyed this taste of his idiosyncrasies after so long.

More importantly, she was in a good mood after what had happened today.

*So how about I read it?* she decided while looking back down at the text.

"Your smile is like a morning cup of coffee. It is a little surprising, it is not sweet, and yet it is so charming and – perhaps due to the caffeine – makes my heart race. In fact, I am having difficulty restraining myself. Ahh, I want to fill you with cream. Are you excited? There is no stopping it now-…"

*That's it. I'm stopping.*

*No, I'll read it, but I won't expect anything from it this time. It's probably going to be something crazy.*

*…And when did he write this anyway? We're always together.*

She nodded, picked up the second page, and lowered her gaze to it.

"Now, let us bring an end to the complicated part. No, perhaps a little more."

About three lines of nonsense punctuated with exclamation marks followed, but she skipped past it.

That left only about fifteen lines.

*…Why didn't he just write this part first?*

As she wondered that, she read the text.

"First, I will tell you something that has been bothering me, Shinjou-kun. There is a possible connection between my family and the Army."

*…Eh?*

Before that question even formed in her mind, she had started reading on.

"My mother's family apparently ran a store that sold set lunches. It was located in what is now an empty lot behind the Tamiya house."

But…

"Soon after entering Taka-Akita Academy, her parents were murdered. The criminal was supposedly never caught, but both of my parents said the issue had been 'settled'. Could we perhaps speculate that my mother's parents were also involved with UCAT and the organization that preceded the Army targeted them? And could the same be said about Shinjou Yukio's parents?"

She had never heard this about his mother and she had a guess as to why he had chosen to inform her with this letter.

*…If he told me directly, it would worry me.*

*I'll assume that's why,* she decided.

Meanwhile, his opinion on her mother was the same thing she had felt while looking at the documents in the orphanage.

She continued reading the letter.

"My father apparently lived in an orphanage with a connection to my grandfather. That old man must have wanted to raise more underlings for himself because he owned a few orphanages and hid that fact from me. It would seem the rights to them were left with the old man back at UCAT and he is also hiding it from me, but I had an inkling of the truth after years of living as that ape's grandson. According to my grandfather, he adopted my father because, 'he was full of himself, stupid, and selfish, so I knew I had to set him straight.' To me, it always sounded like he was describing himself.

"But what about Shinjou Kaname's granddaughter? Who arranged to have her sent to an orphanage and who controlled that orphanage? My grandfather would not leave his friend's grandchild just anywhere. …Although I am sure you have already found that

answer."

After reading that far, Shinjou realized most of this information matched what she had discovered.

However, she had a question about it that also applied to the information about her own mother.

*…Is this information really all that important?*

She knew it was important to Sayama since the past brought him so much pain and she knew she needed to share that pain with him.

But as pure information, how important were the contents of this letter?

"…?"

She tilted her head and continued reading.

"There may be a connection between our parents. And if so, that leaves a certain mystery. First, let us assume my mother's parents were killed by the Army's predecessor. We do know my parents were part of UCAT and Toda Mikoku of the Army told us yours were as well. In that case…"

She read the next line.

"My mother's maiden name was Toda."

"!?"

She wrinkled her brow in a frown and her thoughts matched the next line Sayama had written.

"What does that mean?"

That was exactly her question.

"Shinjou-kun, my mother fought against the Army, so why does a girl in the Army have her family name and why does she know you? It could be a coincidence and there are still some unknowns, but I will write my current answer in invisible ink."

She noticed a circle around a blank area on the bottom left of the letter.

An arrow pointing to the circle said "Place your lips here and say 'Come forth, oh answer'."

*Why go to so much trouble?* she thought. *He's included another weird concept, hasn't he?*

But she did want to know his answer, so she silently placed her lips on the letter.

"Come forth, oh answer."

She looked back at the paper, but…

“Nothing’s appearing?”

When she tilted her head and stared at the paper, she noticed small writing along the left edge.

“Ha ha ha. I tricked you, Shinjou-kun. That circle only contained a kiss of my own. I still cannot find an answer, so I gave you an indirect kiss of apology. Good night, Shinjou-kun, and sweet dreams.”

“Good night and goodbye!!”

She threw the letter down to the ground, but quickly picked it back up.

After an annoyed sigh, she realized she had stopped walking.

“Ah.”

She frantically began moving her legs again.

She put the letter back in her bag, muttered “Honestly, Sayama-kun”, and thought about the mystery he had given her.

*…What does it mean that his mother and Mikoku-san have the same family name?*

But something interrupted her thoughts.

“Oh, Shinjou-san. Wait.”

For some reason, she heard Hiba’s voice from the right.

However, she had just spoken to him over the phone, so he could not possibly be here.

She had to be imagining things.

*…But why I am hearing Mikage-san’s stalker instead of Sayama-kun?*

Her thoughts were interrupted again.

“Wait, wait. It’s me, it’s me.”

Like a true stalker, even an illusion of his voice refused to go away.

She waved a hand to the right and hurried down the slope.

“U-um, Shinjou-san!?”

A visual illusion of Hiba appeared in front of her, so she threw a backhand blow with her right fist.

The illusionary strike hit, she heard an illusionary sound, she felt an illusionary impact, and the illusion gave an illusionary scream and illusionarily rolled around on the ground.

*What a persistent illusion. But this should bring it to its illusionary end,* she thought as she began to walk again.

That was when she heard Mikage's voice from the left.

"Shinjou."

"Eh? Mikage-san? Why are you here?"

She turned to the left and saw the girl wearing her armored uniform.

Mikage gently brushed aside her hair in the moonlight.

"To come get you since you said you can't ride the bulletin train."

"Bulletin? Oh, you mean the bullet train. But, um, what do you mean you came to get me?"

"We used Susamikado, but the address was hard to find and it slowed us down."

Even if it had "slowed them down", not even twenty minutes had passed since the phone call.

However, Shinjou recalled something from about a month before. During the battle with 5th-Gear's Black Sun, Gyes's god of war had taken them from Izumo to Okutama in less than an hour.

Gyes's god of war did not have a specialized propulsion device for aerial movement, so…

"Susamikado would be able to travel even faster…"

"Right. Sorry. We happened to spot you while we were wandering around overhead."

Mikage held out a hand.

"Let's go."

"Eh? Are you sure? And why come get me all of a sudden? I can get back on my own."

"I had a dream of Ryuuji-kun's father and the others fighting. But all of the people he was fighting with are gone now…"

She remained expressionless as she spoke.

"I started wondering if we would lose each other someday."

"…"

Shinjou was speechless, but Mikage continued with her hand still held out.

"So I thought it would be better if we weren't teammates. If we might lose each other, it would be easier if we never had each other in the first place."

Mikage smiled.

"But you're working hard, aren't you? And so are Sayama, Heo, and the others. …I want to work at it too. That way I can become a

better and better person even after my evolution ends. So…so let's gather together. If I can still get even better after my evolution ends, then Susamikado can get even better too."

She took a breath.

"So I won't let Kazami be like that. I won't let anyone ruin all of her work…and I won't let us lose each other."

Shinjou reflexively took Mikage's hand when she heard that.

Strength gathered in her eyebrows and she returned Mikage's still gaze.

"You're right."

She knew there were people she could never meet, but she still squeezed the fingers holding Mikage's hand.

*This must be my answer to Team Leviathan disbanding,* she thought while also thinking of her mother.

"You really are right. We haven't lost each other yet, so it isn't too late. So…so let's go gather together to make each other stronger."

If they could do that…

"We can get stronger and stronger!"

"Right," said Mikage with a squeeze back.

Shinjou realized she wanted to speak with Kazami.

She knew Sayama had not really meant it when he had told Kazami they were disbanding.

He had not been telling her to leave Team Leviathan.

*…Please realize that.*

The rest of them had a part of their past supporting their involvement in the Leviathan Road and Kazami had to have something similar. What was it that made her want to fight?

Shinjou knew Kazami had worked so hard on those deadly battlefields despite being a normal person and she knew Kazami always scolded them and tried to lead them so they would not give up.

When Shinjou and Sayama had first met, it had been Kazami who had saved them from the werewolf.

Kazami had worried over the death her shot had led to, but she had never let it show.

*…I know that she belongs on Team Leviathan.*

So…

*…Find your reason for being with me.*

Shinjou nodded, but then realized something.

“Huh? Where’s Ryuuji-kun?”

“Sleeping over there.”

She looked in the indicated spot and found the collapsed illusion. It had yet to get up.

“Reality can be harsh.”

Mikage tilted her head as if she did not understand.

●

A girl moved quickly through a white hallway.

A small creature sat on her short blonde hair and she wore an orange flight jacket over a dark blue school uniform.

The chest of the jacket swayed as she walked and it contained the name Heo Thunderson.

Her footsteps were light as she passed the nurse station on her way to a hospital room.

The young nurse inside lowered her head, took a bite of a chocolate snack called a Strawbcookie, and spoke.

“Do your best with him.”

She held up her right arm in a triumphant pose.

Heo had been raised in the United States, so she was not quite sure what the gesture meant in relation to doing her best with Harakawa. She gave up on understanding and simply took it as support.

“Y-yes. I’ll do what I can.”

“If anything comes of it, we’ll take care of you here.”

*Wait, I think I do know what she means,* realized Heo as she hurried back to the hospital room.

She knew she could not run, but she could not let the drinks Harakawa had asked for get cold.

*…I need to hurry without rushing.*

It seemed Harakawa’s mother, Yui, was stable now.

Ooki had told Heo the woman had collapsed, but Harakawa had not contacted her.

She had wanted to contact him, but she had not worked up the courage.

She had been afraid he would tell her not to come with him.

After some hesitation, she had made her way here, but it had taken about two hours by train and foot.

It had been past eight by the time she had arrived and Harakawa had been in the hospital room.

He had briefly explained Yui's condition and said this happened all the time.

He had said nothing more and Yui had continued sleeping.

Heo and Harakawa had remained in silence until past nine when Harakawa had handed over his wallet.

Now, Heo was walking down the hallway with drinks.

Having something to do had calmed her heart a little. At the very least, it was far better than sitting in silence while thinking about the fact that she had come uninvited.

She reached the room with the cans clanking together in her arms.

She heard someone speak from inside and focused on it, assuming it was Harakawa.

"Heo-san. Hurry on in while he's using the bathroom."

It was Yui's voice and it was surprisingly steady.

*Didn't she collapse?* thought Heo while walking through the door.

She prepared to say "You're feeling better, aren't you?", but…

"…"

She swallowed the words when she saw the color red.

●

The color Heo saw was small.

It was nothing more than a red stain on the handkerchief Yui held over her mouth.

However, it stood out in the white hospital room filled with white light.

Heo quickly ran over and prepared to say something, but Yui stopped her with a hand.

"Don't worry. I only coughed up what was left in my throat."

"B-but!"

The woman forced down Heo's panic with a smile and a nod. She then held out a hand.

"More importantly, could I have something to drink? My mouth still tastes like salt and iron, so I don't want to talk much."

Heo tensed her shoulders and hesitated, but she opened a can and held it out.

"I bought Maximum Coffee's tea flavor like Harakawa asked…"

Yui first tossed the bloody handkerchief in the trashcan to the side of the bed.

Next, she drank the contents of the can with some blood still on her lips.

It almost looked like she was simply pouring the can into her mouth and she consumed about half of it.

"Kwaah! Now, that was good. …Oh, sorry. Did I scare you?"

When she smiled, she was back to her normal self.

Relieved, Heo tensed her shoulders and shook her head.

She then sat on the bedside stool Yui gestured to.

She set the two remaining cans on the side table and realized something.

"Wait. Is this why he asked me to buy three drinks?"

"You really are slow, Heo-san. Heh heh. That boy knew I had woken up. He probably wanted to force the troublesome part onto someone else."

She sighed and leaned back against her pillow.

"You want to hear about my condition, don't you? To make up for how rude he was, I'll tell you some extra things he doesn't know about. For example…"

Yui slowly brushed aside the hair on her shoulders.

"My illness was caused by the secondary damages of the Great Kansai Earthquake. …Officially, at least."

"…!"

"Surprised? I'm glad. Dan always looks so displeased when I mention my illness, so I never tell him much about it. But I think it's about time I told you some things."

She reached for the window and cracked it open.

The cold night wind slowly entered the room.

She exhaled into that fresh air and faced Heo.

Her narrow eyes were smiling.

"Are you going to make an old woman drink alone?"

"Oh, um, no."

The can Heo grabbed was an IAI carbonated nectar called Nectar Pepper.

She liked its odd flavor, but everyone at school had said she had strange tastes when she said she liked it. She did not know what kind of jokes the people at UCAT would make, so she had yet to come out about that there.

While she enjoyed the odd flavor, Yui looked at the can.

"You are a unique girl, Heo."

"…Sorry for making you choose your words so carefully."

"It's fine. Letting your unique side out like that is much better than that boy who is always trying to crush that side of himself. How about you become my child?"

Heo shrank down and shook her head and Yui smiled bitterly.

"Yes…you're right. Deciding that for myself would be wrong to Maria."

"…!?"

Heo quickly turned around when she heard her mother's name and she saw Yui's spread palm.

It avoided Baku and brushed through her hair.

The woman rubbed her head and spoke from beyond the ticklishness.

"My illness isn't much. …It's just that my organs will fail. Do you understand what I mean?"

Heo thought about the question while the woman rubbed her head.

"You mean your organs switch between failing and working?"

"Yes, but the timing is unstable. So if I'm too active, it could lead to damage that would affect them even when they aren't failing. That's why I'm in the hospital."

She kept her hand moving as she spoke.

"I won't get any worse, but I won't get better either."

"It…can't be cured?"

"No, it can't." Yui sounded cheerful. "And even if it could be, then you and that boy would stop worrying for me."

"But," started Heo before looking at Yui's face and stopping.

She had seen the small smile on the woman's face. It was her usual smile.

"Let's just leave it at that. …Also, there's one other person with this same illness. Do you know who that is? He has white hair and…I guess he'd be middle-aged now. The needle was pointed more in the

negative direction for him, so his condition only gets worse and worse."

She did know who that was.

She knew him as the man who rarely made an appearance despite being Team Leviathan's supervisor.

If he had the same illness as Yui and his case was even worse…

"Wh-why?"

She grabbed Yui's hand and looked straight at the woman's smiling face.

"What kind of battle happened on the night of the Great Kansai Earthquake? What kind of battle left you and him like this and killed my father?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Well…"

She had nothing to hesitate about and the words came out before she could even think about what to say.

"Because I'm where I am now because of that battle."

●

Heo spoke aloud what she had been wondering about lately.

"Team Leviathan disbanded and I was told to learn about the past if I wanted to know why. But when I investigated the past, I found I didn't know much of anything. So many pieces are missing. …But I know one thing for sure: everything that happened led to me being here."

She took in a breath.

She left this to her thoughts and her moving mouth and she relied on the nod Yui gave her.

"I am happy that I can be with the others, but I don't know why I'm here. …My mom protected me from Black Sun, my great-grandfather fought, and Black Sun made a mistake for his people, but what did my parents do?"

"Heo-san?"

Her head had started to drop, so she raised it.

She saw Yui slowly look outside the window.

"I'm not very good at talking with people anymore, am I? …That's because my friend said she didn't like someone who talked too much."

Heo followed Yui's gaze and saw something white sitting on the windowsill.

It had flown inside and landed.

"That's one of the cranes my teacher makes with origami."

"I'm glad to see Diana is doing well. And here I was hoping to earn some points with my son's future wife."

"Eh?"

Heo blushed and Yui turned back toward her and took a sip from her drink can.

"Is Dan important to you?"

"Y-yes."

The woman rubbed her head.

"Do you want to be with him?"

"Y-yes."

She rubbed her head again.

"What will you do if the two of you have a child?"

Heo could not just say "yes" to this one, so she thought about it.

*…What does she mean?*

Was it a simple question? Yui had just mentioned "earning points", so Heo felt she should give the best answer she could and she wanted a reliable answer that would put the sick woman at ease.

*…Um, uh, uh…*

"F-first I would get insurance and then I would pay into an annuity! And I would buy a house and I would save up money in the bank!"

"Calm down, Heo."

"Okay."

Heo felt dejected and Yui gave a troubled smile.

"This may be hard to imagine, but what if there was a battle that could destroy the world? And what if you had an important family at the time?"

"I would want to protect that family."

"Now, what if you were one of the people who could fight in that battle?"

"…"

"I think the answer you want lies there, so try thinking about it."

Heo could not reply.

After all, she was simply imagining.

She had no family, so she could not answer a question based on that assumption.

However, Yui rubbed her head again and Heo trembled.

“Wh-why? I didn’t answer you.”

“This is *because* you didn’t answer. Reflexively saying you would fight sounds cool and makes it look like you understand what that means…but it takes this all too lightly.”

She heard Yui’s voice from beyond her hand.

“We all hesitated back then, but we went in the end. If you easily gave an answer, it would mean all our worry was for nothing. So it’s okay if you aren’t sure yet, Heo.”

“O-okay.”

After another rub of her head, she was asked another question.

“But are you not getting along with Dan? The two of you were being so quiet.”

“Oh, that… I came here today without telling him.”

“Did he say anything about it?”

“No.”

She gave a nervous shake of her head and she saw Yui smile and nod.

“Then you’re fine. He didn’t leave the room, right? That means he knew you would come even if he didn’t call for you. He thinks that’s normal and doesn’t see a problem with it. And regardless, you are still by his side. …Are you going to eat dinner after this?”

“Y-yes. And after dinner, I…um…think I’ll have him massage my chest.”

The hand on her head stopped and the woman paused before speaking.

“You mean have him grope your breasts?”

“Y-yes. Well, no, not quite. He’ll also be rubbing stuff on them. Um, uh, he said you taught him a way of making them grow. He said he would use honey and sugar to stimulate them and then some herbs.”

She received an immediate reply.

“I did *not* say that!”

The door behind her burst open and Harakawa stormed in. His eyebrows were raised and his finger was pointed at her.

“Heo Thunderson! What kind of hallucination did you have a front-

row seat for this time!?”

“Ehh!? B-but we arranged it and everything. In the bath!”

“Wait, Heo Thunderson. …You’re making some kind of massive misunderstanding here.”

“Y-you can’t talk your way out of this one!! I almost lost a lot of blood from what you said!”

His betrayal had left her on the verge of tears, but she realized Yui’s hands were supporting her shoulders from behind.

“Dan, try to be a little quieter. …And, Dan. Can I say one thing?”

“I’m innocent here. As long as you understand that, you can say whatever you want.”

“Fine, Dan. …Go get some insurance. And make sure to pay into an annuity and a savings account.”

“Please believe what your son is telling you!”

“What’s wrong with this? And if you don’t mind, then why not help out some? You would like that, wouldn’t you, Heo?”

Heo was unsure what to say.

She looked at Harakawa, but his frown was telling her to say no. She had no choice but to sigh and answer.

“That would be too much trouble for him.”

She tensed her shoulders as she spoke. For some reason, this made his face grow paler and paler.

Behind her, she heard Yui’s smiling voice.

“No one can win against you, Heo-san. I can see why Thunder Fellow would stick with you.”

“You know about that?”

“Yes, but you all will learn even more from here on. That creature on your head…Baku, was it? He wasn’t there in our time. But with him, you should be able to learn about us and about yourselves. So…”

Yui gave Heo’s back a gentle push.

“Go. You have a visitor.”

Neither of them asked who it was and they heard a voice that resembled their own.

- **—There is no mutual understanding.**

Heo reflexively stood just as she lost all sensation from the

outside world.

# Chapter 25

## “Beyond Understanding”

If you are there
Your hand will reach

●

This was a space that lacked understanding.

One's eyes could see, their ears could hear, and their senses of taste, smell, and touch worked, but they could not understand any of it.

Everything existed, but the information on its existence did not get through.

Heo stood in that world.

*…Um…*

The faint repelling force on the bottom of her feet was the internal sensation her feet being pressed on by her own weight.

That alone was certain.

She shrank down because it felt like only the bottom of her feet existed. It felt as if lifting a leg would divide her existence in half.

"What do I do?"

She could speak, but she would receive no answer.

Her eyes could see around her, but they gave her no information.

Nervous, she shouted a name.

"Thunder Fellow!!"

She wanted that cry to get through.

"…"

But there was no response.

Even after several seconds, she was not swallowed up by the machine.

If she was, she would feel it in the repelling force she could feel, but it never happened.

Calling for the blue and white mechanical dragon was no use.

*…Does that mean he really is someone else?*

That thought sent a chill down her spine.

She and Harakawa could not fight on their own. And from what Sibyl had told her in the hospital, Mitsuaki had a scroll concept weapon. It had been sealed below Izumo UCAT, its origins were a mystery, and it could bring out a world.

*…According to the report, the automaton named Gyes was hit by a small sun bullet.*

That was when Heo felt something on the right side of her skin.

It was heat.

She felt heat in her skin just like after a trip to the beach, and that meant…

"That small sun is flying in from the right."

She knew she had to avoid it. She had to escape to the left, right, front, or back.

"…!!"

But not knowing anything about the world around her left her frozen in place.

Was there an obstacle in her way? How was she supposed to fight after escaping? She knew nothing and her anxiety locked up her legs, but that was exactly why she cried out.

"Harakawaaaa!!"

A moment later, she felt a force down below.

Just like with the sensation on the bottom of her feet, she could tell something was holding onto her right ankle.

*…Eh!?*

Before she could ask what this was, some kind of force struck her.

●

A white building stood below the night sky. It was a wide hospital.

However, there was something odd about this hospital.

It was empty and there was a large hole filled with shimmering heat in the second floor of the southern building.

The walls had melted and the scorched hole had been torn open from the ground level. The hole continued through the second and third floor ceilings and into the emptiness above the roof.

Everything behind the hole was melted, torn away, or simply gone. The edges of the hole still glowed with a scarlet light and the shimmering heat rose thickly into the sky.

A single person looked up into the hole and shimmering air.

He was an elderly man in a white coat standing in the front parking lot. He held a thick scroll below his arm and his hands remained in his white coat's pockets.

"I suppose my concept space is a little too much of a handicap. Only my brothers and I can continue as normal inside it."

Mitsuaki turned around as he spoke.

"Perhaps I should go help Brother Ikkou. No, I should remove this

concept space first.”

A moment later, he froze in place.

He had heard a sound from the hole in the hospital’s second floor that the small sun fired from the scroll had produced.

Something was moving.

*…It can’t be.*

“How did she avoid it? It should have been a direct hit.”

He turned around, looked up, and saw two figures standing up on the edge of the hole in the second floor.

He muttered the names of the two who were filthy, injured by a few fragments, yet alive.

“Heo-sama and Harakawa-sama!!”

●

Harakawa judged the extent of his injuries from the pain he felt.

The pain was not too bad, but he could not let his guard down since any pain on the surface would be cancelled. Still…

*…I don’t feel my pulse anywhere in my body.*

Confident that he had not had an artery cut, he got up.

He felt pressure in his arms.

It was the pressure of the weight produced by holding Heo.

“That was close.”

When speaking with Brunhild at school, they had discussed a few plans for the four old men’s concepts.

Mitsuaki’s concept prevented you from understanding anything beyond yourself, but any pressure inside your body was treated as “yourself”.

The first countermeasure was to get down.

When on the ground, it was harder for bullets or other attacks to hit.

*…Plus you can’t fall over and you can feel your entire body as it presses against the ground.*

From there, they could crawl forward while feeling around by hand. The heat had warned him of the small sun, but he had been lucky enough to reach Heo’s ankle the very next moment.

It was also pure luck that he had been able to quickly stand and tackle her to the ground.

He touched the girl in his arms to confirm his relief.

The feeling would also be reaching her as pressure.

*…I hope this is enough to calm her.*

He spoke silently to himself while touching her with his finger. After confirming it was a large part with his palm, he pressed his finger down.

He used the pressure of his fingertip to write on her body.

In this world of no mutual understanding, he wrote words into her body to get his thoughts across to her.

“C-a-n-y-o-u-h-e-a-r-t-h-i-s?”

He continued writing.

“H-e-o-T-h-u-n-d-e-r-s-o-n.”

●

Heo’s pulse was racing.

She did not know what exactly had happened, but she knew Harakawa had saved her.

She had been unable to avoid the enemy's attack, but he had somehow reached her, embraced her as if to cover for her, and knocked her to the floor.

She could feel his presence from the sensation of him holding her in his arms. It was a welcome sensation.

But when he had approached her feet and stood up to push her down…

"U-um…"

She brought her hands to her cheeks and shouted at the boy who could not hear her.

"Harakawa! Wh-why are you sticking your head up my skirt!?"

When he had stood up at her feet, his head had gone right up her skirt. On top of that, he had wrapped his arms around her hips and pushed her to the ground.

"No. Wh-what are you doing…a-at a time like this?"

His hand was currently groping around at the skin between the waist of her skirt and her underwear.

The way his finger searched around almost seemed to be writing something.

His finger moved complexly below her navel and even poked at her navel as if dotting an "i".

She squirmed on the floor and his finger wrote a straight line down.

"Ah, n-no! Not in front of your mother! We're in the hospital, Harakawa! My chest is one thing, but it's too soon to go there!"

His finger continued down her skin as he pulled down her underwear.

"Nooo! Not here!! And not like this!!"

Partially due to her struggling, his finger quickly pulled her underwear all the way down to her knees.

●

*…Did you hear that, Heo Thunderson?*

Harakawa's questioning thoughts were cut off by a sudden knee to the jaw.

"Gwah! Wh-why are you struggling, Heo!?"

But speaking would not reach her.

He felt around in the air and his left hand found something. He

pulled on it to bring her close and realized it was her shoulder.

But he felt the hand on her shoulder quickly rising and falling.

He also felt a bit of heat.

He wondered why and his thoughts reached a certain emotion.

*…Did that last attack scare you? Did you knee me because you're panicking?*

Realizing that, he decided he had been in too much of a rush to get his thoughts across.

He hesitated for a moment, but wrapped his arms around her again, felt around for her hand, and found it.

"Sorry. I was in too much of a hurry. We definitely have an enemy here, but know this."

He squeezed her hand.

"It's going to be okay."

●

Heo felt Harakawa take her hand, pull her close, and wrap his arms around her.

*…Ah.*

It surprised her a bit, but she breathed a sigh of relief at the strength in his arms.

This was his usual self and she felt his usual strength, so she figured out what had happened during his previous offense.

*…He must have been scared and he panicked.*

*In that case, I can forgive him,* she decided. *That's the mature thing to do.*

She felt heat fill her cheeks as she sat up on the floor.

That was when she realized something: her panties were gone.

*…?*

They must have come off when she had kicked Harakawa away.

*…W-well, it's not like anyone else can see me right now and I can find them right after this ends.*

She placed a finger on what she thought was Harakawa's chest. She moved in close and realized how she could get her words through to him. She had seen this in a romance movie a long time ago. The characters in the movie had been lying naked in bed, but…

*…She wrote his name with her finger.*

"Harakawa."

In the movie, the guy had replied in kind.

Soon, her wish was granted. He used his finger to write a message on her tightly held right hand.

“Are you okay?”

“Y.”

“Thunder Fellow?”

“N.”

He stopped writing after that answer.

She assumed he was trying to figure out why she could not call in Thunder Fellow, but she was wrong.

She quickly realized the real reason why he was not responding.

She felt heat.

This heat was larger than last time, but it came from slightly below just like before.

“Heo.”

He called her name via writing.

“I can’t call in Thunder Fellow,” she quickly wrote on his skin.

She then gave an abbreviated explanation.

“He’s someone else.”

However, he immediately replied.

“N.”

“Why!?”

She reflexively trembled and shouted out even though it would never reach him.

“I tried and it didn’t work! He really is someone else!”

“Call him.”

As if responding, Harakawa continued to write and the movements felt irritated.

“He isn’t someone else.”

After all…

“He’s you and…”

And…

“Us.”

As soon as she realized what that final word meant, the second heat arrived.

She took action. In order to endure her worry and strengthen her thoughts, she wrapped her arms around Harakawa, clung to him, and closed her eyes.

*…Yes. That's right.*

She trusted in the words he had spoken to her.

*…Thunder Fellow isn't someone else. He's the power that was given to me.*

She opened her eyes and faced that unseen world and all the unseen things it contained.

*…He's the power that connects us.*

So she cried out the name of that power, the name of the great power they always possessed.

"The family of thunder unhesitatingly speaks its desire for the power of the evening star!"

She understood why he had not responded when she had called his name before.

She had been calling for someone outside of herself.

But now her dignified voice was directed within herself.

"Come forth, Thunder Fellow!!"

A moment later, it appeared.

●

The thirty meter blue and white mechanical dragon broke through the empty hospital's southern building as it was summoned behind Heo and Harakawa.

First, the wall behind them dented in and filled with cracks as if a giant fist had punched it.

"…"

A wave of destruction ran through the wall as if pushing in on the center of the cracks.

The destruction and appearance happened simultaneously.

With a sound of breaking and a shaking of impact, the hospital broke under the weight of the mechanical dragon.

It was destroyed.

The dragon was now piercing straight through the center of the three-story building.

The first floor had been crushed and the third floor had collapsed with its support gone.

As the piles of debris were further smashed, Thunder Fellow observed his surroundings.

He could understand nothing, but the vibrations of rubble pouring

on his armor allowed him to predict the situation.

Low-Gear's laws of physics were simple. The movement of all objects had a cause and an effect, so if one could perfectly read the movement of all objects, they could predict where everything was, what it would do, and where it was going.

Similar to using sound for sonar, Thunder Fellow calculated the strength and direction of the rubble hitting him down to the last pebble and used that to view the world.

This was much like making predictions based on all the sounds one could hear.

However, Thunder Fellow pulled it off.

He made the calculations in an instant and predicted the locations of the two things that mattered most: Heo and Harakawa.

They were approximately one meter in front of him and two meters down.

He raised his canopy, swept aside the falling rubble with his atmospheric defense and gravity barrier, and spoke.

"It has been a day since I last saw you, Heo and Harakawa. … What happened?"

The two climbed into the cockpit.

"Do you need my help?"

"Yes."

"Yes, we do!"

He heard their voices through their synchronized senses.

He closed the canopy and used the vents to expel the dust that had gotten inside.

He lifted his body and raised his head from the rubble of the crumbling hospital.

"Thunder Fellow, please turn to the right! The enemy is to the west!"

"Why are you so sure?"

"The previous heat attack came from that direction. More importantly, Yui said we had a visitor just before we entered the concept space. …And she could only see outside the window."

"Understood."

All of Thunder Fellow's senses and all of his predictions also told him that was the enemy's location.

"I am predicting our surroundings using my tactile devices and I

will send those predictions to all of your senses in real time. That is the only power I can give you. After all, my body and weapons have already been given to you. So fight. 5th-Gear's power does not wish to be stopped. Use your acceleration, speed, and flight to teach a lesson to the dragon standing on the earth. Teach him that simply standing on two feet is no different from standing still."

Thunder Fellow determined this was no longer a problem.

"This is my first battle with another Gear, so please win."

●

Harakawa's senses returned to him.

He saw light and darkness.

He was wearing his uniform and he sat in Thunder Fellow's cockpit as the hospital crumbled around them.

However, a few things were not right.

First, he knew he was injured, but he could not see those injuries on his skin. Second, the world outside the canopy was limited.

*…The horizon is too close. No, the world doesn't even reach the horizon.*

He realized what was happening.

"Thunder Fellow, are you showing us a predicted world you calculated out?"

Beyond the falling rubble, he saw a few cars in the parking lot, but he could not see through their windows. Also, the vending machines along the road had no sample cans beyond the plastic covering them.

Thunder Fellow had predictively constructed this world with the bare minimum of information and he was transferring it to their senses.

It felt off, but he had no time to worry about it.

"If I can see this much, it feels real enough!"

The hospital collapsed slowly in his vision thanks to Thunder Fellow's synchronization.

They would be trapped under it soon, so…

"We need to escape!"

He grabbed the two roll bars and tried to stand up.

But he was stopped by a voice.

"Harakawa!"

After combining with Thunder Fellow, Heo cried out with panic in her voice.

“The ocean!!”

He just about told her that was impossible, but Thunder Fellow and the hospital were struck by a wave several times the building’s height.

“!?”

The wall of water instantly swallowed up the dragon and hospital.

The rubble mixed around in the water, accumulated, and tried to snag Thunder Fellow on the bottom.

The water pressure and current tossed them around and the outside of the cockpit filled with a dim green with almost no visibility.

*…Damn! Which way is up!?*

He could see a light in one direction in the water, so he forced Thunder Fellow through the swirling water. He shook the dragon’s body and rotated once to blow away the surrounding sand.

“Go!!”

He pointed the nose toward the light, grabbed the roll bars, and leaned his entire body forward.

After a slight time lag, the dragon began to move forward.

A deep rumble and vibration seemed to rise from the bottom of his gut.

He kept the course straight.

Thunder Fellow shot forward and thus up. He parted the water so quickly that a path of vacuum appeared behind his giant form, but the surrounding water pressed in on that path and produced an underwater explosion.

A radiating shockwave ran behind him and shook the sea.

His own shockwave caught up to him and washed across his armor, so he accelerated.

The speed came in an instant.

The blue and white mechanical dragon shot from the sea and into the sky.

The black sky he saw was dotted with light. It was an endless night sky of twinkling stars.

However…

“Where are we?”

After flying into the night, Harakawa saw a black sea below and that expanse of water seemed to continue endlessly.

"Harakawa, I cannot calculate the extent of the sea."

"Impossible. We're in a concept space, aren't we? It should have a limit."

He looked around again, but he could only see the night sky and ocean.

"Where'd the hospital go? This is like a mythical flood or something."

"I-I was thinking the same thing. And Harakawa, about the sky…"

Drawn by Heo's weakening comment, Harakawa looked up in the night sky.

He saw the color black.

The vast sky was dark. Countless stars covered that black celestial dome, the moon was so close he felt like he could reach out and touch it, the valleys on Mars's surface were clearly visible, and Jupiter's Great Red Spot was facing their way.

"What is going on? Why are the heavens so close?"

Not only did they appear to be in arm's reach, but the planets looked small enough to hold in his arms.

"What is going on?" he asked again just as the ocean below vanished.

Next, he heard Mitsuaki's voice.

"This is the power of my concept weapon. This scroll tells the story of a certain world. You passed the sun earlier, remember?"

He could not tell where the voice was coming from, but he understood what the man meant.

This attack had begun from the moment they had avoided the initial projectile of heat.

"That sun was the beginning. From there, the enemy is brought inside the concept weapon."

"We're inside the scroll?"

"Correct, Heo-sama. You are inside a false world drawn inside a hanging scroll. That is preventing my concept from reaching you, though."

Hearing that, Harakawa spoke quietly.

"So this is like those unreasonable miniature garden worlds from old stories?"

“U-um, Harakawa? I’m glad you can observe this so calmly, but how do we get out?”

He faced forward and saw something coming.

However, it was not anything concrete.

“Darkness?”

“That is correct, Harakawa-sama. I am close to fully opening the scroll. And the story depicted on this scroll begins with the ‘good morning’ of creation and ends with the ‘good night’ of destruction. You have the privilege of seeing it all. But before it is fully opened…”

A bitter laugh rang in their ears.

“You were supposed to escape. But…oh, dear. It seems it is already fully open. Too bad. …Now please be destroyed along with that world.”

The darkness approached head-on.

It was noticeable because the stars were vanishing and the density of the black was growing.

The dark curtain up ahead was swallowing and eliminating the stars.

Mercury had looked so large, but it was devoured and then the comets circling the heavens were swallowed up by the black.

Space was silent and so Thunder Fellow made a suggestion.

“Harakawa, Heo. Would this have more intensity with sound? I can simulate the sounds based on my predictions.”

“No, thanks,” answered Harakawa.

“Oh, I kind of want to hea-… Sorry, I won’t say it again.”

“That’s the spirit, Heo Thunderson. But we don’t have time. We need to think about what to do.”

As he spoke, Venus was devoured, so he clicked his tongue.

“Is running away our only option?”

“That would be difficult, Harakawa.”

He frowned at Thunder Fellow’s comment.

“What do you mean? If we’re just running, all we have to do is fly. Isn’t that your specialty?”

“Harakawa, Heo. Listen carefully. …There must be an exit to this concept space.”

“An exit? Doesn’t that mean we can escape?”

“No. Based on the readings I have been receiving, this world is

only thirty centimeters wide and a meter long.”

That made the world only as large as an unrolled scroll.

“Are you saying the inside was expanded with concepts, but the exit is still only thirty centimeters?” asked Heo.

“Yes,” answered Thunder Fellow. “A thirty centimeter exit exists somewhere in this space. Finding that would mean our victory, but…”

He briefly hesitated.

“I was not made to function in space. I can fly using gravitational acceleration, but turning will not be easy and, without the necessary oxygen, you will have almost no air to breathe when flying in a vacuum. I am currently running in a short-term underwater mode, but it truly is only a short-term solution.”

He spoke to Harakawa.

“If it comes to it, I will ensure the purpose of my existence by cutting the cockpit’s oxygen supply and preserving Heo in a state of suspended animation. I will shut off all functions save her combination with me.”

Harakawa replied to the proposal with a bitter smile and a shrug.

“I see. That’s a good decision. I have no complai-…”

“I do!!”

Heo’s shout filled the cockpit. It was enough for Harakawa to freeze in place.

“Thunder Fellow! Please remove my combination!”

The dragon did not reply no matter how many times Heo called out to him.

Meanwhile, the darkness approached the sun and all of the light dimmed.

As darkness fell, Heo’s angry and exhausted shouts continued.

“You can’t.”

Harakawa heard her tearful voice in that darkening world.

“Don’t leave me behind and go somewhere else because of me.”

After all…

“We’re all together. I am, you are, and the others are.”

Those words brought sudden movement to Harakawa’s heart.

*…Teammates, hm?*

“Hey, Heo.”

He called for her, but it must have been too sudden because she

did not reply.

"Can you hear me, Heo Thunderson?"

"Eh? Oh, y-yes! What is it?"

He nodded at her question and spoke slowly as if checking on what was inside his own heart.

"You already know the answer."

"Eh?"

"My mom asked you why you would go to the battlefield. I think I know what you asked yourself about that: why am I here? It sounds like a line from a youth dream journal, doesn't it?"

"W-what's wrong with that? And, um, what about it?"

*You still don't get?* he thought while grabbing the roll bars.

He had once asked himself a certain question.

*…If we're still fighting 7th-Gear after disbanding, why are we so focused on the name "Team Leviathan"? I know why now.*

"Because we don't want to be alone."

"Eh?"

"Do I have to say it again?"

But it was a simple and definite thing.

"Heo. Heo Thunderson. You already know the answer to this question, so I'm only going to give it to you once."

"What question is that?"

"Why are you where you are? Why did your parents and my parents fight? The answer is simple and it isn't because of strength or duty."

He smiled bitterly as he spoke.

"It was because you and they didn't want to lose what was important, no matter what. Isn't that right?"

"…!"

"You can put it in your own words later and I'm not saying it again, so don't forget it, Heo Thunderson. Now, I'll tell you one other thing."

"Wh-what is that?"

"Escape from here isn't impossible, so don't cry, Heo. And you know how to escape. If you realize that and tell Thunder Fellow, we can make it through this."

"But…!"

He squeezed the roll bars in his hands and faced forward.

The approaching darkness had fully swallowed the sun. They were surrounded by darkness, but he did not care.

“It’s gotten dark, but that’s perfect. We won’t have to see any fakes.”

Strength gathered in his body and he thought about the best time to take off.

“You already have the answer, just like your former self. …Long ago, in the very beginning, you had sensed the answer. You knew where to find the exit in this strange, confusing world.”

●

Mitsuaki stood alone in the nighttime parking lot.

The wind blew. It was the west wind of late autumn. It descended from the Akigawa Valley far to the west, it had gathered the scents of Hinohara and Itsukaichi, and yet it retained the aroma of the forest and rivers.

The man enveloped by that wind was illuminated by a single color.

It was the scarlet of fire.

The thick scroll in his hands was burning from the tail end.

“It is powerful, but it takes time to activate. And the destruction on the inside causes the automatic sympathetic destruction of the actual object.”

Over half of the scroll had burned by this point.

*It is over,* he thought.

He generally played the support role out of the four brothers. He was powerful enough, but he was not as skilled with a weapon as Ikkou, he did not focus on strengthening is his body as much as Nijun, and he had not been given a tool like Yonkichi.

However, he did not hold it against Chao.

*…Everything is in balance.*

His fixed concept was enough to leave his opponent almost entirely unable to act.

If he had any real offensive power, there would be no need for his brothers.

He had only switched from support to attack now because he had acquired such a powerful concept weapon during their attack on Izumo UCAT.

“I wanted to know what would happen if I fought with my own

power, but…”

He had successfully eliminated what could be called 5th-Gear’s strongest mechanical dragon.

The burning flames were proof of his victory.

He had expanded his fixed concept to rob his opponent of their freedom and then he had spread out the scroll’s internal space to envelop them.

The initial small sun had fallen out when he was spreading out that internal space.

With how long it took to activate, it was hard to use as a weapon, but he had succeeded using his concept.

*…I did it.*

“But,” he began with a tilt of the head. “It was not very beautiful.”

Linking technique to strength for a victory was the true essence of a support role.

However, the battle was over.

Only a quarter of the scroll remained and the fire was shrinking.

“I defeated a 5th-Gear mechanical dragon.”

He felt he had won, but at the same time…

*…I won too easily.*

The reason for his lament was simple. Since he had won so easily…

*…I might be even stronger.*

How far did his skill go?

Wouldn’t he only be able to say he had fun with no regrets once he reached his absolute peak?

“…”

He looked at his left hand which did not hold the scroll. The palm was white and cracks were forming in it. The hand still felt soft, but it was being destroyed in a way in which such physics did not apply.

“Is it over?”

He looked up at the moon in the night sky.

That was when a voice reached him from the hospital.

It came from the single window on the second story that contained light.

“Mitsuaki-san, was my child not good enough?”

“He was not, Yui-sama. Unfortunately.”

“I see,” replied Yui with an exaggerated shrug. “I thought that

might be the case. …Or maybe not.”

Mitsuaki frowned at that.

A moment later, he felt heat in his right hand.

“…!?”

He saw a mass of fire at the end of his hand.

The scroll had yet to be completely destroyed, but it was spewing scarlet flames.

With the sound of something fluttering in the air, the heat of the burning paper burned his hand.

“What!?”

His right hand exploded.

●

Harakawa saw the night sky appear in an explosion of light.

In only an instant, the world rapidly grew and expanded before his eyes.

Below the sky of the real world, he saw the hospital’s parking lot.

“Thunder Fellow, activate your optical camouflage! The concept’s been deactivated!”

He saw smoke. It looked black in the darkness and it was wrapped in what looked like a mist of bluish-white light.

“I can guess that the enemy’s concept weapon was destroyed,” announced Thunder Fellow.

“Th-then we…” began Heo.

“Escaped,” finished Harakawa.

Harakawa had Thunder Fellow crouch down because Mitsuaki would be inside the smoke spreading out in front of them.

Another attack could come at any time.

On top of that, his mother and others were inside the hospital behind them.

He gripped the roll bars while planning to use Thunder Fellow as a shield if there was an attack.

However, he heard Mitsuaki’s voice from beyond the smoke.

“This is… This is a surprise. How did you escape that universe?”

“That was easy.”

Harakawa continued squeezing the roll bars as he spoke.

“You fired that small sun like a bullet at the very beginning, right? It had to have been fired from the scroll, so the exit from the scroll

would be along its path. We just had to work out its trajectory from the angle Heo had felt the heat in and then compare it to the shape of the universe that Thunder Fellow had calculated out. We didn't even have to fly to the ends of the universe. The exit was right next to us."

"You certainly took your time in leaving for it being right next to you."

"Yeah," he answered with a frown. "Once we knew how close it was, a certain idiot felt calm enough to say the stars in the distance were pretty and Thunder Fellow stayed still so she could watch them for a while longer."

"S-sorry. …Oh, but I did manage to wish three times on a shooting star."

"What did you wish for?"

"I can't say, I can't say, I can't say."

He ignored her and faced forward. The smoke was clearing and the attack would come once it did.

The moment came suddenly.

"There!"

If he desired to attack, Thunder Fellow would respond.

However, he saw something unexpected.

Mitsuaki was damaged.

"Ha ha ha. What is the matter, Harakawa-sama?"

The man laughed, but he had lost not only his right shoulder but most of the right side of his body.

The wind blew across his body which had broken from the right collarbone to the right hip.

The surface of the break was white and hard and the smile turned their way was stiff.

"It would seem fighting truly is not my thing. I thought I was familiar with the weaknesses of my equipment, but I had not fully grasped how they would affect an actual battle."

"You probably would've won if it hadn't been us."

"I am delighted to hear it. However, it also proves that I cannot defeat you."

His smile grew.

"But this is not over yet. I am not enjoying myself yet. After all…"

He sank down. He lowered his hips, which caused the base of his

right leg to shatter.

"…!"

Just as Heo gasped, he prepared to leap on his one leg.

"It seems Yonkichi promised to tell you about the past, so I will tell you one thing. …The ones once known as the Five Great Peaks were Diana, Hiba Ryuuichi, Sayama Asagi…"

He paused.

"…James Thunderson, and Alberto Northwind."

"What!? Why is my dad on the list!?"

"That was a temporary command structure quickly put together with Asagi-sama as the leader and the other four below him. If you wish to know more…search elsewhere. Now, I will go fight how I fight best! I will help my brothers!!"

The remaining smoke was blown away and Mitsuaki jumped up into the sky and vanished.

A great roar travelled westward and vanished into the night sky.

"H-Harakawa! He must be headed to where Kazami is!!"

"I know that, but we're injured too. And about what he just said…"

Harakawa opened the canopy and looked up into the hospital window and his mother's eyes.

However, Yui waved her hand.

"I can't tell you that. If you want to search for the answer, you'll need to travel down the Leviathan Road."

"I see. So it gets back to the Leviathan Road, does it?"

He sighed and belatedly realized that his body was covered in the heat of injuries.

Heo must have realized it too because the back seat split to the left and right and Heo appeared from below.

She held her skirt down while climbing over the front seat and running toward him.

"U-um, Harakawa…"

However, her expression froze when she looked up at him.

"Ah," she said while staring motionlessly at him.

Just as he wondered what this was about, he heard his mother's voice from the hospital's second floor window to the left.

"Dan, I was meaning to say something, but…check your head."

*I don't think I'm injured there,* he thought while lowering his

head a bit to use the inside of the canopy like a mirror.

He saw his face but found he was wearing something white on his head.

It was not his usual bandanna. It covered his head and it had two large holes in it.

“Is this…?”

“Wh-why are you wearing my panties on your head!?”

“How should I know!?”

He grabbed them off and heard his mother on the second floor.

“Dan, I won’t get mad, so just tell me. What did you do to Heo-san?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

He saw Heo cover her cheeks with her hands and seriously shake her head.

“D-don’t lie like that! You stuck your head up my skirt and pushed me to the ground. I told you to stop, but it wouldn’t get through to you. …And after you attacked my belly button and stomach, you pulled down my underwear! Just because you were lonely in that world of no understanding is no excuse!”

“I was not lonely!!” He shouted as his mother glared at him. “What’s with this world of false accusations and no mutual understanding!? Is this some new concept!?”

●

A nighttime city was filled with streetlights and the lights of people working.

A single figure flew above that bright city.

The black winged figure travelled east at an altitude of about three thousand meters.

The ten meter metal giant was wrapped in wind as it flew.

A girl stood on its right shoulder near the back. She grabbed at its back armor with both hands and her orange jacket fluttered in the wind.

“Wow, this is fast. We’ve already passed the peninsula I saw to the right, so are we above Nagoya now?”

“I think so. Are you cold, Shinjou-san?”

It was Mikage who answered Hiba’s question and she sounded like she was tilting her head as she did so.

“She should be fine since Susamikado’s gravitational control is covering her to a certain extent.”

But Hiba replied with a scolding tone of voice.

“Mikage-san, only she can tell whether she’s cold or not.”

“Right. Sorry, Shinjou and Ryuuji-kun. I don’t give people rides very often.”

“It’s fine,” said Shinjou with a bitter smile at their exchange.

At the speed they were moving, she would normally be blown off by the wind. That was not happening, so Mikage had to be holding her in place.

“But does that mean you’ve given people rides before?”

“Yes. Sometimes I take Ryuuji-kun’s mother to go shopping. Especially on mornings with a really good sale.”

“And no one notices?”

“Not as long as I land in the woods too quickly to be seen and immediately remove the combination. But my control wasn’t good enough once and the eggs broke and some kind of internal connection in his mother’s back slipped out of place, so I don’t do it much anymore.”

“Y-yeah, it’s best if people don’t always take the easy route.”

“Right,” replied Mikage.

Shinjou sighed and looked down at the night scenery moving by at tremendous speed.

However…

“?”

One light was different.

It was moving slower than the rest.

A long line from east to west was travelling east just like them.

“That’s a bullet train. Is it the one I was supposed to take?”

“Probab-…”

Hiba trailed off and he asked something else a moment later.

“What should we do?”

It took Shinjou several seconds to realize what he meant.

However, she quickly grasped it all and spoke.

“He’s here.”

A man stood on the roof of the train travelling down below.

The one-armed elderly man wore a brown leather flight jacket and a white work outfit.

It was Yonkichi.

He raised his one hand in greeting as his clothes flapped in the wind.

“What should we do about this guy who’s acting like someone in an ’80s tokusatsu movie?”

“Hm? Isn’t this kind of thing popular now?”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-san, it’s no longer the Showa era.”

“Eh?”

She frowned, but then heard Mikage speak.

“Let’s go, Ryuuji-kun, Shinjou.”

“Are you sure, Mikage-san?”

Mikage nodded as the four wings slowly expanded behind her.

“We lost once,” she said. “So it’s time we won once.”

# Chapter 26

## “Road of Shadow”

Relativity only works
When two parties are involved

●

Yonkichi held onto the large pantograph on top of the bullet train and looked into the sky.

Black wings descended through the wind and clouds that shined white in the moonlight.

It was Susamikado.

The god of war dropped straight down, but it was trying to land behind Yonkichi.

He stood on the fifth car from the front and seven more cars continued behind him.

The black form made a soaring arc through the sky and caught up with the final car.

But instead of slowing, it came toward him.

The metal wings were no longer used for attitude control and it wielded a black sword in its right hand.

It intended to strike as it passed by.

Susamikado approached with growing acceleration and shifted its path slightly outward to cut Yonkichi down.

"!"

And that was precisely what it did.

The six meter black metal blade flew toward him with surprising accuracy.

The sword sliced through the air so its tip would catch on him.

He was currently on a train's roof.

That was a narrow area.

The pantograph took up the center and the sides contained only empty air.

No matter how he evaded in this narrow space, Susamikado could likely slice him in two after a correction to the sword's movement.

He could always reverse their positions using his fixed concept, but that would slice Susamikado in two on top of the bullet train.

"And there are passengers on the train."

He had used that as a shield so they would not fire on him from above, but now they were using it to restrict him.

*Well, whatever,* he thought while choosing to dodge the approaching black line.

He leaped into the air behind him.

He powerfully yet nimbly kicked off the train roof and instantly reached a height of ten meters.

The blade continued after him.

The god of war partially raised it overhead, but…

"…"

It only grazed Yonkichi's shoes.

He spread his arms and prepared to land as if keeping up with Susamikado's forward movement.

He flipped around and faced the front of the train just like Susamikado.

Finally, he landed.

His feet set down above the roof. He stood on the high-voltage line running above the pantograph.

He ran along the thick power cable while Susamikado flew to the left of the train.

He raised a hand, but not in greeting. This time, it was a farewell.

…*Now I will end this.*

He lightly tread on the thick high-voltage line and ran both quickly and…

…*Delightfully!*

He raced along the cable while skipping at the same speed as the bullet train below.

"Wonderful."

He muttered to himself as he looked to Susamikado.

"My usual tension has grown a hundredfold."

The god of war was beginning to fly into the sky ahead of him.

"My usual thoughts have grown a hundredfold."

It was moving away to prepare for its next attack.

"My usual movements have grown a hundredfold."

But it was too late. He was already looking at the black giant's back.

"My usual enjoyment has grown a hundredfold."

Yonkichi thought as he raised his right hand toward its back.

…*If I had my left arm, I could keep my hands on my hips as I skipped!*

"It's a shame, but let's do this without any strange speech patterns."

As he lowered his right arm, a giant red artificial arm appeared

along its outer edge.

Its target was seven meters away. Susamikado was spreading its wings as it began to fly into the sky.

“Great Sage Attack!!”

That space exploded.

Everything within five meters was bent, crushed, and smashed to pieces.

That power of destruction burst where Susamikado’s back had been.

However…

“!?”

Yonkichi saw the god of war vanish from the air.

He saw something else in the night sky instead.

“Hiba-sama and Mikage-sama!? Did you break the combination before the attack landed!?”

Before he could finish asking, Hiba did something unpredictable.

To move her away from the explosion of destruction, he shoved Mikage to the bullet train roof.

The reactionary force pushed him away and Great Sage’s power expanded in the opened space between the two of them.

Despite the explosion, the two of them were unharmed.

However, Yonkichi saw Hiba falling to the ground on the left side of the train.

At their speed, he would never survive the fall and he was too far from Mikage to be taken inside Susamikado even if Mikage summoned it.

*It’s over,* realized Yonkichi. Mikage might land on the train, but Hiba was done for.

Or so it should have been.

Instead, he heard Mikage land on the edge of the train roof and immediately turn to the back.

“Right.”

She made a powerful leap toward Hiba as he fell into the dark forest rushing by.

However, she would not reach him.

Even if both of them reached out toward each other, they could not fill the approximately five meters between them.

That was why Mikage opened her mouth.

Her eyebrows were slightly raised and the cry that left her mouth was similar to calling someone's name.

"Susamikado."

That was precisely what appeared before Yonkichi's eyes.

He saw the god of war's back.

Its arms were spread, but it did not immediately take Mikage inside.

It caught her on its right hand and reached out its body.

*…To catch Hiba-sama in its left hand.* It awkwardly copied the movements of Mikage's outstretched arm.

"You can move it without combining now!?"

Mikage had her back to him and did not turn around.

Instead, the black god of war's wings moved in preparation to turn toward him.

The right hand carried Mikage to its opened chest and Hiba jumped from the left hand to the chest.

The boy turned his strong gaze to Yonkichi.

His earlier decision to push Mikage away and everything else had been perfectly natural for the two of them.

"But you have forgotten one thing."

From Yonkichi's point of view, the combination process left an opening. He had proven that this morning.

*…It is sad that they forgot that.*

As he rapidly skipped along the high-voltage line, he tried to grab Hiba as the boy jumped for Susamikado's chest.

He kicked off the power cable and stuck his left foot forward.

"Acho!!"

He made a flying kick with enough force to knock Hiba, Mikage, and Susamikado away.

But as he did, he saw Mikage move out of the corner of his eye.

She moved to embrace Hiba from behind to take him inside the god of war, but she also opened her mouth with her head hanging down.

"Shinjou."

As soon as he heard that name, something struck Yonkichi from behind.

"!?"

The impact seemed to smash his entire body and he noticed white

light behind him.

He wondered what this was as he was blasted forward through the air.

He fell into a tailspin and saw Shinjou lying down on the roof of the rearmost train car.

Ex-St rested on her back and she aimed it toward him.

*…I see. So that's why they passed by the final car during their first approach.*

They had let Shinjou off and prepared for this plan.

They had had a single plan from the beginning.

They would intentionally break the god of war's combination and then recombine to lure him into attacking.

It was meant to keep him from using his position-swapping concept.

That was when Shinjou had fired Ex-St into his back.

She would not have brought the weapon to Sakai, so Hiba and Mikage had to have carried it to her from UCAT.

They had predicted this situation.

*…Ha ha. I certainly had no intention of using my fixed concept during that attack.*

*I was careless,* he realized while laughing at himself and flying ten meters above the ground.

*…I interfered with their combination this morning, so I wanted to do it again.*

"You did well to use that against me."

As he spoke in midair, he heard another voice. It was Mikage's.

"You took this too lightly."

In his rotating vision, he saw Susamikado down below. The combination was complete and the machine was raising its wings.

It flapped the wings and the massive giant flew up from the bullet train's roof.

The right fist carried by its initial speed acted as the leading edge of its acceleration and it broke through an explosion of water vapor.

"I'm insulted that you did not take this more seriously. You need to follow Ryuuji-kun's example. You could learn from what he always says."

Her voice accompanied the blow.

"He says he takes everything seriously and so he isn't playing

around when he peeps!”

The metal fist launched Yonkichi’s body into the night sky.

●

Shinjou saw Yonkichi fly high into the heavens.

The train carried her below his one-armed body and he arrived just below the moonlight in the sky.

*…That looked like it hurt.*

But then she realized something, so she looked up at Susamikado.

“Mikage-san! Go get Yonkichi-san! He has to tell us about the past!”

“U-um, Shinjou-san? Is it just me or have you been ignoring me and only talking to Mikage-san?”

She had never really noticed it before, but now she intentionally ignored him.

She made sure the wind on top of the train did not blow her away, she held down her hair, and she looked up into the sky.

That was when she saw something appear around Yonkichi’s body.

“Is that…the Great Sage!?”

The Great Sage’s right arm formed an L-shaped guard in front of his chest.

“That was fast,” said a voice from Susamikado. “It got in the way of the blow, so he was knocked away but not actually hit.”

*…So he’s almost entirely unharmed?*

Shinjou prepared to fight again as Yonkichi spun around while supported by the Great Sage’s hand. He moved directly toward her with the moon in the background.

“…!? Shinjou!! Here we go!!”

She knew what Susamikado meant. Yonkichi was descending right in front of her.

*…He’s targeting me!*

But she could not move. If she carelessly stood, she would clearly be blown away by the wind.

And so Susamikado flapped its wings to save her.

The speed provided by its wings covered the distance from first to last train car in no time. On top of that…

“Keravnos!!”

The black launcher attached to its right arm with a metallic sound.

Keravnos used the Concept Core and there was only one reason for Susamikado to use it.

*…To blast Yonkichi-san and the Great Sage as they fall.*

They could not defeat him without going that far.

Shinjou nodded as she built her resolve.

*…Let's win this.*

She quickly rolled along the vibrating roof and aimed Ex-St into the heavens. The weapon had a long back end, so she had to press the back against the roof before she could reach the trigger.

A square of faint pale green light appeared next to the gun barrel portion and it displayed Yonkichi.

The red crosshairs moved inside the light and centered on the man.

If she pulled the trigger, she would hit him, so she prepared to do exactly that.

But something else happened first.

"Please wait! If he uses his concept, it's all over!"

Shinjou gasped.

*…!*

If their positions were reversed here, she would be exposed to two separate dangers.

She would be hit by her own attack and she would be flung high into the sky.

Yonkichi shouted down from the moonlit sky.

"Ha ha ha! You would be wise to stay still! Doing anything now would be dangerous!"

"You're right."

Shinjou nodded, but she raised her eyebrows and stared at Yonkichi's smile through the sight.

"But dangerous is fine by me!!"

She pulled the trigger.

White light shot out and the recoil pressed her against the train roof.

A moment later, she heard a voice.

- **—The world is reversed for an instant.**

She suddenly found her back was not pressed against anything.

She was over one hundred meters in the air.

The concept had swapped her position with Yonkichi's.

●

During the floating sensation that preceded a fall, Shinjou quickly observed her surroundings.

Above her was the vast bluish-black sky and below her was the night scenery.

*…Wow.*

In the center of the night scenery, she saw a line of lights travelling east.

That was the bullet train.

A man lay on his back on the roof of the last car.

A pair of giant arms extended to either side of his body and a certain power shot from him and toward Shinjou.

It was light. Specifically, it was the destructive light she had previously fired from Ex-St.

While illuminated by the white light she herself had fired, she heard Yonkichi's voice.

"I'm disappointed that it had to end this way, Shinjou-sama."

She slowly began to fall and she replied through the wind of acceleration.

"You're right."

As soon as the words directed at the standing man vanished into the sky, the light struck her.

The light exploded, the sound of impact was intense, light sprayed everywhere, and something shattered.

However, the destruction had not been caused by Shinjou.

Something had moved between her and the light.

The object that had taken the light for Shinjou and been destroyed was…

"Our sword!!"

Susamikado spoke with Hiba's voice as it flew above the train and Yonkichi quickly turned defensively toward it.

"You can't mean… You planned that far ahead!?"

*There's no way we could do that,* thought Shinjou with a bitter smile.

All she had done was trust her teammates.

*…When Susamikado prepared Keravnos, Mikage-san called my name and said "here we go".*

She had trusted there was meaning in that statement and fired without hesitation.

She nodded as the light and black fragments washed over her and she aimed Ex-St into the sky.

She fired once toward the moon.

The intense recoil created downward acceleration and she dropped straight toward the train.

Meanwhile, three winds blew through the air.

The first was Susamikado on the front of the train as it tried to catch up to Yonkichi and swing Keravnos around.

The second was Shinjou as she descended toward the back of the train with Yonkichi between her and Susamikado.

The third was Yonkichi. He spread the Great Sage's right hand to stop Keravnos and spread the left hand toward the roof where Shinjou was landing.

They all moved.

Having arrived from the front, Susamikado aimed Keravnos at Yonkichi.

Shinjou fired Ex-St diagonally downwards once and then landed. She then aimed the long cannon at Yonkichi.

However, Yonkichi opened his mouth just before they attacked.

"I'll use my fixed concept!"

Following his words, all three winds came to a stop.

The three of them had taken up their positions.

"This is a dangerous situation, Yonkichi-san."

Susamikado's Keravnos and Ex-St were trained on him from either side and he had the arms of the Great Sage held out toward both opponents.

Whoever moved first would attack and whoever attacked would have their position swapped using the fixed concept.

At point-blank range any attack would be a direct hit.

If they were swapped out, there would be no avoiding the attack.

Understanding that, Shinjou made a firm statement with sweat on her brow.

"Now, what should we do?"

●

The wind blew and they moved eastward despite standing still.

The moonlight covered the train and Yonkichi held the Great Sage's arms toward the enemies to his left and right.

"This is quite an odd situation."

He faced forward instead of at either opponent. He stared out at the trees of the mountainous region ahead and into the black sky.

"What will you do if I use my concept? Even if you both attack at once, you will be hit by each other's attacks and I will remain

unharmed.”

So…

“It would be best for Mikage-sama to attack me. Susamikado may be able to withstand Keravnos or Shinjou-sama’s Ex-St if she is swapped out.”

“Um, why has everyone been ignoring my presence?”

Yonkichi ignored the boy.

He then opened his mouth and began with a sigh.

“Let us begin.”

Immediately following those words, Shinjou’s voice reached his ears.

“I won’t shoot you.”

He frowned, turned toward her, and found her smiling at him.

“I can’t shoot someone who’s helped me out so much.”

“Oh? I am most grateful. That means I will not have to harm you. But in that case, the only one who can hope to defeat me is-…”

“I won’t either.”

His frown grew when he heard Mikage’s voice.

*…You have to be joking.*

He faced Susamikado and gently raised his left hand toward the black god of war.

“Oh, if Mikage-san won’t, then I won’t either.”

Hiba was clearly serious, but then who should he watch out for?

*…Probably Mikage-sama.*

If Shinjou fired, he would swap out their positions and she would be defeated.

They could also attack at the same time, but Shinjou would never survive Keravnos.

But if Mikage fired, it was possible Susamikado’s armor could protect it enough from Keravnos to keep going.

Even if they fired simultaneously, Ex-St would not be enough to destroy the god of war.

Thinking about what would happen afterwards, Mikage required the most attention.

With that thought, Yonkichi began to look back at Shinjou.

But as he did, he heard someone fire.

“!?”

The sound came from Ex-St and he saw the light approaching.

Meanwhile, Susamikado remained motionless.

*…It was Shinjou-sama!? They used Susamikado as a feint!?*

Shinjou was not even wearing an armored uniform, so she could die if he swapped positions with her now.

"You foolish girl!"

Even as he turned toward her, he used his concept.

He sensed wind in his ear as he turned, but it did not matter.

He hurriedly activated the concept before the light reached him.

- **—The world is reversed for an instant.**

They switched places.

●

Yonkichi stood where Shinjou had been.

He saw Ex-St's solid light flying away from him and he saw Shinjou beyond it.

But…

"!?"

For some reason, he saw wind past Ex-St's light and behind Shinjou's shoulder.

The wind was black.

*…Susamikado's hand!?*

The black god of war's hand had already grabbed Shinjou's shoulder.

It pushed down from above and knocked her onto her butt.

Her hips dropped down and Ex-St's light took out a few strands of her disheveled bangs on its way to Susamikado.

Just as he thought it would hit, Yonkichi noticed something else.

The tip of Keravnos was thrust past Shinjou and toward him.

"…!?"

As soon as Shinjou had fired, the god of war had moved to pull him down and fire Keravnos on Shinjou. The wind he had felt in his ear had been its movements behind him.

The end of the black launcher would hit him at the same moment as Ex-St's light hit Susamikado.

He had to choose between a direct hit from Keravnos and a direct hit from Ex-St.

The answer to that was obvious: Ex-St.

And he acted accordingly.

- **—The world is reversed for an instant.**

With those words, he and Susamikado switched places.

Ex-St would hit him now, but he knew he had won.

He had been hit by Ex-St once already, but it had not been a fatal blow.

And this time, he had the Great Sage ready.

If he used it to guard, he could defend against Ex-St. After that, Keravnos would hit Susamikado and both Shinjou and the god of war would be in a direct line ahead of him.

If he used the Great Sage's spatial explosion, he could eliminate both of them at once.

"I will win!"

Victory.

That was what he desired. He knew this would be no fun unless he won.

He had lived the last sixty years doing nothing. And in those sixty years…

*…I have never given Chao-sama any good memories.*

Chao had tried to apologize to them at Hossawa Falls.

He had wanted to say she had nothing to apologize for, but their relationship was not one that let him.

*…So I will win!*

*I will win and prove that you did create something wonderful. You sometimes speak of your former companions from old UCAT, but I will prove that we are superior to their descendants.*

*I will prove that your creations raised in Low-Gear are stronger.*

*…That is…*

"That is the pride we can give you as residents of Low-Gear, not of 7th-Gear!"

So…

"Do not apologize to us!!"

With that shout, Yonkichi's position completely changed.

Ex-St's light was directly in front of him now.

It would hit him, but that was part of his plan. He could block it

using the Great Sage.

*…I can win!*

Convinced of his victory, he looked to see Keravnos strike Susamikado.

"…!?"

But it was gone.

For some reason, Susamikado did not exist in his old position.

Nor was Keravnos which had been on its arm.

"What!?"

As he shouted, he saw what existed in its place a few meters beyond Shinjou.

There were two people there.

Hiba and Mikage took each other's hands and slowly tried to land on top of the train.

The boy landed on the moonlit train before the girl whose blonde hair whipped in the wind.

She landed soon thereafter. Guided by his hand, she turned toward Yonkichi.

Yonkichi then realized what had just happened.

"You broke the combination just before the switch!?"

He also realized something else.

He realized what it meant for the god of war combination to be broken in the middle of swapping places.

What had been one object had become two and its weapon had been sealed away.

So in the moment Ex-St's light hit, he saw two things. First, his Great Sage was sealed to match the sealing of Keravnos. And second, just as Susamikado had divided into two…

"My body will also split!"

He felt the intense pain caused by his entire body being sliced in two.

"…!"

With the pain and the loss of his weapon, their positions fully swapped.

Yonkichi was made into two people and the two that Susamikado had split into desired to become a single person.

"…!"

Susamikado and Keravnos appeared behind Mikage and Hiba

without being called.

Yonkichi's concept automatically activated the god of war's combination in order to fully swap out the positions of the two sides.

"You even used your combination process as a weapon!?"

As he spoke, the blast from Ex-St struck him in the chest.

"…!"

The light exploded, a sound much like smashing rock filled the air, and damage spread through his body.

He had been using the Great Sage for defense, so he had been left defenseless.

On top of that, his body destroyed itself in its attempt to divide in two.

His body burst and the sound literally pierced his bones.

*Pathetic,* he thought.

He had been so badly destroyed by an attack from Ex-St which he had taken so lightly.

In a breath, the end drew near and he could tell something was on the verge of spilling from his body.

He felt like his heart had been left exposed and the wind was washing over it.

However, he still moved. He raised his right arm that was still barely attached at the shoulder.

"Great Sage!"

The giant red arms appeared on either side of him.

They were already over ten meters long and held high.

He targeted Shinjou and Susamikado who were lined up in front of him.

He had to make this one strike. He had to win.

*…Chao-sama!*

He had been given the strongest individual combat ability of the four brothers, but at the same time, he had been made the least intelligent.

He thought that was meant to create a balance between the brothers. If he was too strong, his brothers would have nothing to do.

*…The one thing I can do on my own is achieve absolute victory in an individual battle.*

If he could not even do that, what good was he?

So he raised his crumbling right arm.

The arm broke and turned to sand in mid-swing.

Even as he heard the sand spray into the air, the Great Sage continued on.

This was his final attack.

This was his greatest strength as a 7th-Gear combat life form. This was the concept and strength created so he could oppose gods of war and defeat mechanical dragons.

The ones to overcome all that were the two to inherit the power of 3rd-Gear and…

"Shinjou-sama, listen!"

He let out a shout because he felt he had to. He had promised to tell them of the past, so he had no choice but to shout to them here.

"You are the child left by Yukio-sama during that battle in Osaka!!"

Shinjou's eyes opened wide, but then her eyebrows rose and she closed her eyes.

"Thank you!"

With those words, lights arrived from both Ex-St and Keravnos.

He watched as the twin lights struck the Great Sage, he watched as the Great Sage was pierced through and ripped away, and a single thought filled his heart.

*…What delightful turn of events!!*

He felt some regret mixed with amusement.

For so long, the four of them had thought they were so strong that they needed to restrain their own power and they had never doubted that strength of theirs. This had led to a certain thought.

*…That this world is boring.*

*Yes,* he said in his heart.

*…It is boring.*

This world was boring, but…

*…It is filled with such entertaining people. There are some that not even we can defeat.*

How far could those people go? Did they even have a limit? And…

*…Can I help raise them to even greater heights?*

He felt he had done something that would make Chao proud.

Their presence had further strengthened the descendants of her companions.

That was something Chao could not do and something no one else could have done.

That was worth being proud of.

*…And I used my own actions to help myself enjoy this boring world!!*

He gave a bitter laugh in his heart.

*…I am the kind of idiot who changes his mind too easily.*

But…

"That counterbalances my power, gelge!"

With those words, the Great Sage exploded and his entire body burst.

The last thing he felt was the night wind blowing in from the east.

The wind was blowing.

It continued to blow without ever ceasing.

# Chapter 27

## “Waking Light”

In that moment when I awaken
I just hope it is not too late

●

Something stirred in the darkness.

It was a stir of awakening.

A bed sat in the center of a room dyed in the colors of night and a girl next to the bed lifted her head from the blanket.

She wore a half coat with the name Kazami stitched inside the collar.

She sat up while still wearing the clothes she had come here in.

Her half-opened eyes turned to the clock on the bedside table.

“It’s only eight?” she muttered. “I hate not being able to sleep at night.”

She stretched her back in the darkness.

She looked to the head of the bed and saw Izumo’s face.

His eyes were still closed in sleep and she smiled bit at the peaceful look there.

But…

“…”

Her eyebrows lowered when she saw the wrecked weapons leaning against the bed and Izumo’s left arm.

She hung her head and brought a hand to her eyes.

“I’m not even crying anymore.”

She unsteadily rose to her feet. She had to make a request for each night she spent in the hospital room and she had to call her parents.

Talking in the room would disturb his sleep, so she stood up.

“Ah.”

No strength reached her knees and she almost fell.

She grabbed the railing on the foot end of the bed to support herself and she sighed.

Wondering if something had happened, she looked across the room, but her behavior had not changed it at all.

She slowly gathered her strength again and left the hospital room.

She opened the door to the hallway.

“That’s bright.”

She had been in the dark for so long that even the hallway’s small fluorescent lights seemed too strong.

It took several seconds for her eyes to adjust.

After waiting that long, she saw a hallway with hints of the dim night remaining in the corners.

The fluorescent lights on the second floor hallway's ceiling were kept low enough to not disturb the people's sleep.

Kazami looked left and right.

To her right were several more hospital rooms and an emergency exit with a maglite available.

To her left were a single hospital room and a lobby. Beyond the passageway to the southern building, she saw the nurse station counter and the hospital ward beyond that.

She would head to the nurse station to make her request for spending the night and then call home in the lobby because cellphones were forbidden in the hospital. She tried to remember if she had a ten yen coin to use in the lobby's red phone.

Once she started thinking, the thoughts kept coming.

There was a bath toward the front of the hospital. She had declined to use it the day before, but…

*…I really should use it today.*

*No, no,* she corrected herself while shaking her head. *Try to remember why you're here.*

Another thought suddenly came to her.

*…What on earth am I doing?*

She wanted to stay by Izumo's side, but what would that accomplish?

She thought about it, but…

"No."

She was not sure what that word of rejection was directed at, but she had made up her mind.

She faced left and started toward the nurse station.

"?"

She noticed something sitting next to the room's entrance.

It was a large green bag. It was larger than a shopping bag and looked more like a travel bag. She checked inside.

*…A change of clothes.*

It also had a box of rice balls and other food.

She crouched down, dug through it, and found a few letters.

The topmost one was from Sibyl.

"Chisato-sama, I have brought you a change of clothes and a set

of towels."

*…Why does she know my size?*

The next one was from Mikage.

"Heo made dinner, so I brought you some. It's fried chicken and rice balls.

*…Are those two getting along?*

She looked to the next letter which was from the development department.

"This may be presumptuous, but here is a high resolution DVD of Harumi to cheer you up."

*…I don't have anything to play it with.*

She then read a letter attached to a box.

"If you are bored in the hospital room, play with this. It's the full action figure 'Ooshiro in Action'. It comes with a secondary pained expression and a posing stand that sticks into the crotch, so it's a great deal!"

*…I should probably throw that in the incinerator.*

She found a letter and a giant case at the bottom.

"…"

After picking it up and checking what it was, her movements, expression, and breathing all ground to a halt.

"Anti-7th Combat Instructions by Brunhild."

The white case below the letter took up most of the bag.

*…That's X-Wi's transportation case.*

She gasped at the presence of those two things.

She stiffened and took deep breaths to slowly relax her body.

"Sorry."

She closed the top of the bag, gently tapped the hard cloth a few times, and closed her eyes.

"Sorry."

She stood and turned her back on the bag.

She walked down the corridor to the nurse station, raised her head, straightened her back, and opened her eyes.

When she realized how loud her footsteps were, she finally let out a breath.

*…I can't.*

Seeing that bag seemed to tell her what everyone wanted.

*…On the surface, they talk about letting me rest or cheering me*

*up, but deep down, they're preparing me to fight.*

*That was too well put together,* she sighed.

She shook her head and brushed a hand through her pretty dry hair.

"I can't."

*I'll probably never be able to do it,* she told herself.

All she felt was guilt toward G-Sp2 and remorse toward Izumo.

Even if G-Sp2 was repaired and Izumo was healed…

*…I can never return to the way I was.*

Her guilt would cause her to step back from it all.

*Ahh, ahh.* She forced an exasperated sigh in her heart. *I haven't changed at all.*

She had once gotten someone hurt in an athletic club.

Her opponent had been the type to do everything by the book while she had been the type to treat it like a real battle. At one point, one or the other of them was about to be made a first year regular and that was when it happened.

She had tried to lose on purpose to give the regular spot to the other girl.

*…And that ended up injuring her.*

It was not that the other girl had not managed to avoid her attack. Instead, the girl had mistakenly charged in. That girl always did everything by the book, but for some reason, she had strayed from the standard at that moment.

The girl had told her not to worry about it and all the others had said it was just a part of the match.

However, Kazami had withdrawn. Instead of simply handing over the regular spot, she had left that place altogether.

If she had not met Izumo, she had a feeling she would have continued withdrawing from everything.

*And now the exact same thing is happening again,* she mentally sighed.

*…This must be the kind of person I am.*

She left that self-analysis in her mind and raised her head in front of the nurse station.

"Um…"

She called out, but there was no one behind the counter.

Just as she started wondering why…

“Oh, over here, over here,” called a female voice.

She turned to the right, saw a door open in the back of the nurse station, and saw the head nurse step out.

The woman had a connection to UCAT and she had not left her post. Kazami tilted her head and looked at the door the woman had left.

It had a placard saying Nursery.

That was the room where all the newborn babies were kept.

Hospitals were usually a place of illness and injury, but that was the one place filled with life.

That fact relieved Kazami, but she soon recalled why she was here.

“Um, I would like to make a request for spending the night.”

“Okay, wait just a second. I need to settle things over here.”

*…Over here?*

Kazami tilted her head and the head nurse shrugged.

The woman beckoned her over and gestured for her to stay quiet.

Kazami both wondered what this was about and wanted to get the request over with, but she prioritized the former and walked past the nurse station.

The hospital nursery was located next to the nurse station and on the eastern end of the building. Dark glass covered the hallway wall from waist height to the ceiling, so Kazami could see inside.

She saw an oblong room with infant beds lined up along the hallway side.

The white beds resembled cradles and a small child slept in each one.

There was a door labeled Nursing Room on the back of the room and a woman stepped out of it.

She wore white pajamas and held a baby.

She smiled and nodded toward Kazami for some reason.

Kazami did not know the woman, but she nodded back because she had a feeling she knew why the woman had nodded.

The woman laid the child in a nearby bed and moved out into the hallway.

She walked up next to Kazami but did not look at the girl. She kept her eyes on her own child and the other children sleeping beyond the window.

“They’re so cute, aren’t they?”

“Oh, yes.”

As she answered, Kazami realized her thoughts were not the same as this woman’s.

The sleeping children brought the words “defenseless” and “innocent” to mind, but beyond that…

“I can’t seem to put my thoughts in words.”

“Is one of them yours?”

“Ah, no. I’m here for someone else.”

She frantically corrected the woman and started wondering what she looked like to her.

The woman faced her and smiled.

She said nothing and the smile felt genuine, so Kazami said nothing either.

“…”

Feeling uncomfortable, Kazami faced forward to look away from the woman’s smile.

The woman nodded, bowed toward the head nurse, and walked past Kazami.

Her footsteps echoed through the hallway and the head nurse entered the nurse station.

While thinking she should go make her request, Kazami looked into the nursery.

*…Even I was like this once.*

And…

“Will I be able to have something like this?”

But she suddenly came to her senses and shook her head.

*…Don’t do that.*

This was no time to think those happy thoughts. Izumo would have to go through rehabilitation for his left arm after this and they would only start discussing that after all of that was over.

She had a feeling she would back out when it came down to it, but she had another thought as well.

*…I don’t even have the will to fight anymore.*

As she muttered that in her heart, she peeled herself away from the nursery window.

She turned left in order to reach the nurse station counter, but then she heard a voice.

- **—Attack power is at its maximum.**

A voice resembling her own rang in her ears and all light vanished around her.

●

"!?"

Kazami knew what had happened.

A concept space had opened around the hospital and that had cut off the external power.

However, the hospital's own emergency power allowed the emergency lights to activate.

Faint light illuminated the hospital.

The people were gone. The nurse station and the hallway were both empty.

However, Kazami could hear someone's presence.

She heard footsteps.

Someone was climbing the staircase past the nurse station.

The dimly lit staircase circled around on its way up and she saw someone turn that corner. It was Ikkou wielding an Azure Dragon Sword.

"…!"

Kazami began to run on reflex.

She moved west because Izumo was sleeping in the hospital room to the east.

She ran toward the eastern building to draw Ikkou after her once he reached the hallway.

She had to try to run since she had lost to him once and she was unarmed. She would lure him toward her, run away, escape the concept space, and call for help. No one might come to save her, but UCAT could not ignore it if Izumo was in danger.

*…That's what I'll do.*

As she turned toward the far end of the western ward, the nursery briefly came into view.

In that moment, she caught sight of something beyond the glass.

It was a child.

The previous child was sleeping in front of her.

It had accidentally entered the concept space.

*…Why!?*

Suddenly, the child opened its eyes, looked into the empty space for a moment, and noticed the darkness surrounding it.

“——————”

It began to cry.

Kazami hesitated and closed her eyes to ignore the baby’s cries. She prepared to start running.

“Oh? A child ended up in here? What an interesting accident.”

The voice from the staircase settled everything for her.

“…!!”

She turned the other way and charged into the empty nurse station.

She turned around and ran through the half-open door to the nursery.

●

“Honestly.”

Frowning, Kazami threw her body around to rush toward the voice she heard.

“I can’t believe this!”

Once she entered the dimly-lit oblong room, she quickly found the source of the crying.

She ran over to the bed and hesitated, but…

“Fine.”

She shook her head once and picked up the baby and the cloth it was wrapped in.

*…This is a special kind of cloth used for babies, isn’t it?*

While panicking and thinking that at the same time, she inhaled and made a beeline for the exit.

She pushed the door open with her shoulder.

“I feel like I’m stealing the baby.”

She frowned, cut across the nurse station, and ran toward the counter’s eastern exit.

But she heard a voice from the staircase leading down to the first floor.

“Kazami-sama, why are you taking away the child I was just about to place under my protection?”

It was Ikkou’s voice.

The voice allowed her to judge his location and he seemed almost done climbing the stairs.

*…That means I can't escape easily.*

She shouted back at the man to erase the unease in her heart.

"You want to know why I'm taking the baby with me? Because I can't trust your protection, Ikkou-san."

She was ashamed of the tremor in her voice. She had not been like this in the past.

She ran between the work desks and searched for a weapon with her empty hand.

*…How am I going to escape?*

She could not move east because Izumo's room was that way.

But going west would require circling around the counter and running into Ikkou as he climbed the stairs.

*…There's a passageway to the southern building between the nurse station and lobby, isn't there?*

*Is that where I should go?* she wondered.

However, a voice and form cut off her thoughts as they appeared in the stairway entrance in front of the nurse station.

It was an elderly man wearing a white armored uniform.

His hair swayed where it was tied back and he held an Azure Dragon Sword.

"Are you on your way back to Izumo-sama's room?"

His words brought a tremor to her spine.

But the tremor was not because he was implying Izumo was a target.

He was saying something else.

*…If I don't want him to kill Kaku, I have to fight!?*

She gulped and faced the counter's exit.

She ran.

She chose not to look at Ikkou anymore. The sight of her enemy was nothing more than unnecessary pressure for her now.

But the senses she had gained after fighting so many battles told her some things without looking directly at him.

"An attack!?"

She did not turn around, but she knew an attack was coming. After all…

*…I can't hear anything.*

No matter what kind of attack, he would build up his strength in order to release it.

That moment of focus created a unique silence. It was a clear but stagnant silence.

As soon as she felt that tense stillness in her skin, she leaped forward.

Still holding the child, she jumped toward the counter itself instead of the exit.

“I can jump over it!”

At the same time, exactly what she had predicted raced toward her from behind.

She heard a slicing of air that resembled a flute and heard something ricochet off the surface of the wall.

After a quick moment, she landed and ran eastward.

“…!!”

Something exploded behind her.

●

Kazami heard the air burst.

She heard desk drawers and frames bending and breaking, the fluttering of scattered documents, and concrete in the ceiling and elsewhere splitting apart.

“The passageway to the southern building!”

The passageway had been utterly destroyed when the side wall of the neighboring nurse station was smashed through.

She could not reach the southern building now.

As she listened to the sounds of breaking rubble, she ran through a three-way junction and the lobby.

Once she reached the eastern hallway, she realized the lights on the ceiling had gone out.

*…Did the power fail?*

As if to answer her, only the battery-powered emergency lights on the walls were functioning.

Only the floor was lit now.

Her pace threatened to slow as darkness fell over her, but something supported her.

“————”

The small form in her arms moved.

Her heart raced a little at the touch from a power she could not control.

*…That's right.*

She nodded.

"That's right."

After using both her heart and body to agree, she continued to run while holding that life in her arms.

Ikkou's voice approached from behind.

"Kazami-sama, how is Izumo-sama doing?"

The voice was only a few steps behind her, but she told herself it was okay. She did not sense that pre-attack silence.

She continued to run toward Izumo's hospital room and a single thought filled her panicking heart.

*…I have to do something.*

She felt that thought was going to vanish, so she repeated it even more strongly so it could not escape.

*…I have to do something!!*

Her body was frightened, her mind was backing down, and her experience told her she would lose.

But she had those words in her heart.

*I have to do something,* she said again.

Suddenly, she heard a silence behind her.

*…!!*

She moved in an instant.

She turned around. To distract her from her fear, she gathered more strength than necessary and practically threw her body around.

Five meters behind her, Ikkou was raising his Azure Dragon Sword in his right hand.

His attack would arrive an instant later. It would likely be wrapped in a shockwave and could easily slice the building in two.

Kazami responded by throwing what she held in her right hand.

It was a utility knife she had grabbed from a desk in the nurse station.

The blade was drawn out as far as it would go and she threw it by grabbing the back end between her fingers and almost pushing it forward.

She did not have time to take aim, so she used all her strength to

chuck it toward the center of Ikkou's torso.

Immediately afterwards, she saw the knife produce an explosion of water vapor.

*…Eh?*

*Have I always been that strong?* she wondered as the knife broke the sound barrier.

The reason for this was simple. Ikkou's concept had set the attack power to its maximum.

However, the knife could not endure its own shockwave and it shattered.

It destroyed itself.

Fortunately, that proved effective. The small shockwave that spread from the explosion of white water vapor forced Ikkou to defend.

"…!"

As the vibration of the air washed over Ikkou, Kazami arrived at Izumo's room.

However, she did not stop there. She ran past it and pulled a silver case from the bag sitting in front of the room. She opened it with one hand and tossed the case away while holding onto its contents.

"X-Wi!"

She had the baby in her left arm, so she could not wear it over both shoulders. Even so, she placed the strap over her right shoulder and activated X-Wi.

- **—Light possesses power.**

The concept voice accompanied a wing growing from only the right side of her back.

A moment later, silence came from Ikkou as if to stop the expansion of that light.

After that brief silence, she heard a single footstep. He was rushing toward her.

*…He's close!*

While running toward the emergency exit at the end of the corridor, she flapped the wing on the right side of her back.

The wing of light produced wind.

"…!"

She used X-Wi to make a great leap forward.

It was a low jump that sent her skimming just below the ceiling.

As she flew, she twisted her body around and performed a half rotation.

She stood on the ceiling and faced backwards.

The wing flapped as if scratching at the air and she took a large step back.

She faced forward while doing so and saw Ikkou running along the floor overhead.

He was almost directly below her and he was swinging the Azure Dragon Sword up toward her.

"That was fast!"

"This is the average speed among my brothers."

With those words, his sword flashed by.

●

Ikkou swung the blade toward the one-winged girl flying overhead.

She was moving back in a straight line and did not have time to evade.

She had no weapons and the shockwave would reach her even if the sword itself did not.

He regretted hitting the child with the attack as well.

*…It would have been better if I had used it as a hostage.*

It was a sad turn of events.

*…And yet another boring outcome. Not even defeating Izumo-sama will change that as he is still asleep.*

Even as he swung the sword, he felt this was an awful outcome.

The tip of the sword raced through the air, gained a burst of speed, and began to produce its shockwave.

"…!?"

But the Azure Dragon Sword's blade suddenly shattered.

It had not destroyed itself. The blade had struck something before it had produced the shockwave.

It had struck something Kazami held.

With the sound of shattering glass, metal fragments scattered as specks of light.

*How?* he silently asked. *She was unarmed, so how did she break my weapon?*

He looked up and saw Kazami past the scattering shards of his blade.

She quickly moved back along the ceiling and did indeed hold a weapon in her hand.

That was the weapon his blade had hit.

"A fluorescent light!?"

"That's right. Thanks to X-Vi, light is power."

She answered while gliding backwards along the ceiling and she threw the broken fluorescent light toward him.

"Didn't you do that experiment in science class? Fluorescent lights glow white for a while even after turning off."

"I never received a compulsory education."

"That's too bad. You wouldn't understand how hard it was to learn the times table then."

"The same goes…for Izumo-sama!"

Ikkou approached. He hit a switch on the Azure Dragon Sword's base and a new blade was created.

Kazami looked at it as she backed away.

"A second blade!?"

"Unfortunately, there is still more I must shave away!"

He ran and took a powerful step to approach her.

To match her flight, he raced along the floor. To match her retreat, he advanced. To match her interception, he attacked.

The pursuer and the pursued clashed.

Their movement came from their speed and they both released attack power.

Ikkou swung his Azure Dragon sword and it broke. Kazami fell back, removed a fluorescent light from the ceiling, and slammed it into his sword.

Their weapons crossed paths at high speed and destroyed each other again and again.

The swordfight raced down the hallway.

The sounds decorating the fight sounded like sudden bursts of brass instruments.

The roaring wind blew away all of the fragments.

Ikkou smiled and shouted out as he ran along the floor.

“Not bad, Kazami-sama! I would rate this at about 15 points!”

He saw her expression past the bursting light. Her eyebrows were raised and her teeth were clenched, but he revealed a smile regardless.

“Aren’t you having fun, Kazami-sama!?”

“Not in the slightest!!”

*I see,* he thought as he ran.

However, he was certain this was about to become much more fun. After all…

“Then please look behind you.”

She looked back in surprise and saw what was there.

“The emergency exit. This means there are no more fluorescent lights. How will you handle this ending?”

With those words, he broke Kazami’s final fluorescent light.

The Azure Dragon Sword’s blade also shattered into fragments of light, but he swung the sword up regardless.

Once the new blade grew from it, this would become a surefire attack.

An instant later, he saw the wing of light flap and bring the girl down to the floor.

She had turned her back on him.

He also saw her hand reaching for the emergency exit door.

“Do you really think you can escape!?”

“Do you really think you can win!?”

With that question, Kazami turned around.

She thrust forward her right hand as she did so, but it was not holding light.

However, it was holding something.

“Buildings like these keep maglites in the emergency exits. Didn’t you learn that in disaster training at school?”

Kazami switched on the maglite.

●

Light raced down the dark hallway.

The directional light was supposedly powerful enough to be seen from five kilometers away.

It instantly shot down the hallway and struck Ikkou’s body.

He caught the light on the Azure Dragon Sword, but it knocked

him into the air and sent him flying.

The light pursued him as he flew through the air and it accelerated him down the hallway.

The light instantly passed by the nurse station, the nursery, and the corridor to the other building.

“!”

The Azure Dragon Sword broke.

The wall of light continued on and struck his entire body.

“Ohhh!!”

And that was not all. The dust created from the shattered fluorescent lights and steel blades were pushed by the light and acted as reflectors.

What began as a mist of light fragments quickly grew in a chain-reaction explosion.

Countless explosive sounds could be heard racing down the hospital’s second floor from east to west.

The front end of the light explosions destroyed the western emergency exit and made their way outside.

All that remained was the vanishing light, shimmering heat, wind, and…

“I doubt that’s enough to defeat him.”

Kazami turned off the maglite and lowered her shoulders in front of the eastern emergency exit.

# Chapter 28

## “Sound of Soaring”

The sounds of running echo into the sky

●

Sayama woke.

Instead of darkness, he initially saw the night sky.

He had a body and the sensation on its back told him he was probably lying on rocky ground.

When he gathered strength in his body, each part reacted and moved accordingly.

He heard running water. It was flowing swiftly but had not reached the level of raging rapids.

After hitting Nijun with the flying kick, he had likely fallen into the river below and washed up on the bank downstream.

He then noticed that what had saved him from drowning was caught on his left arm.

Just before hitting the water, he had pulled it from his bag and filled it with air.

“The Shinjou-kun body pillow cover.”

He tilted his head over and saw the float made from the cover had soaked up the water and lost the air inside.

“Shinjou-kun.”

He sat up and held the cover up in both hands.

“It would sound dirty if I said I got you wet, wouldn’t it?”

He lowered his arms, checked his watch and found it was ten at night. A fair amount of time had passed since he had jumped down.

Wondering what had happened to Nijun and considering the possibility that he had been swept away, Sayama called out to him.

“Nijun-kun.”

He received a response.

“Yes?”

It came from behind him and from very near his defenseless back.

However, Sayama knew this had already been settled, so he asked a question without turning around.

“Do you have something to tell me?”

“Yes, although it may be too forward of me.”

“What is it?” asked Sayama.

After a hesitant pause, Nijun answered.

“Could you…compete with me again in negotiation?”

“I see.” Sayama nodded and brought a hand to his chin in thought.

“It is true you have a lot to bargain with, but I have nothing. Are you sure you want this?”

This answer also took some time. After a thoughtful silence that lasted the span of about five breaths, he answered in the affirmative.

“Yes. If I can defeat you, it will mean that I overturned this world in at least one way. That would be the greatest honor as someone from 7th-Gear.”

“I see. That is an excellent way of viewing this. Then let us begin right away. As for our bargaining chips…”

“How about my Concept Core and a hint concerning the past? … And I will ask a single question. If you cannot answer it, it will mean your loss.”

“I see,” said Sayama again as he watched the river flowing through the night.

After a short pause, Nijun spoke quietly.

His question reached Sayama with the sound of flowing water in the background.

“Can you make me lie while under the effects of my concept?”

“In other words, you want me to make you tell a lie without stopping the concept?”

“Yes.”

Sayama thought about the man’s words.

Gyes of 3rd-Gear could not lie and he had once made her do so during a negotiation, but this was different. The man would be unable to speak as long as he was aware it was a lie.

*…Then how can I make him tell a lie?*

He thought while watching the flowing river.

Suddenly, a certain fact came to him. It was a way of expressing a lie.

And so he slowly raised his head and looked into the night sky.

“Nijun-kun, how about I try one thing? I am going to test just how much you understand your own concept.”

He asked a question.

“Nijun-kun, have you ever lied?”

“Yes.”

“An excellent answer. Now, Nijun-kun. If you have lied, then tell me what it was you said. But if you have, in fact, never lied…”

He spoke clearly.

"Then remain silent."

Nijun responded to Sayama's question.

"…"

With silence.

But that silence itself meant that he could tell a lie here.

It was a contradiction.

Based on the defined conditions, that answer was not possible. It rejected the concept space.

"!!"

As soon as that answer was made, the world changed with the sound of shattering glass.

The world expanded.

Sayama saw the surrounding air begin to move and the river current pick up speed.

Unable to withstand the self-contradiction, the barrier of the concept space had broken. The man who had created the space had accepted the contradiction.

As the night wind washed over the river bank, Sayama smiled bitterly and rested his head on his hand.

"That was a simple contraction, but even that was enough for you to overcome the ability of your fixed concept. I would speculate that your Concept Core does not include a concept to handle self-contradictions because it is only a fourth of its original size. …So, are you satisfied with that?"

He received no response.

He waited a while longer and still received no response, so he removed his head from his hand.

"Nijun-kun?"

He turned around, but Nijun was nowhere to be seen on the slope leading from the river to the forest.

Something else was there instead.

"The Concept Core."

A ten centimeter red ball of light floated at Sayama's eye level.

That was Nijun's true form. It was one of 7th-Gear's Concept Cores.

Sayama reached out toward it and spotted writing below the scarlet light.

Hiragana characters were written in the river water on a torn piece of a white coat. They had clearly been written in a hurry.

"Yukio."

That was all it said.

He assumed it meant Shinjou Yukio, but the writing ended before saying anything else.

Most likely, everything had ended when Nijun reached that point.

*…Why? No, what was he trying to tell me about the past by writing the name Yukio in hiragana?*

And before that…

*…Is he saying the reading of the name is important? Or is the name Yukio a clue to something?*

Thinking was not enough to find an answer, so he stood and shook his head.

"Well, whatever. I need to hurry back. I am worried about the others."

He reached out for Nijun's Concept Core and it slowly circled to his right side.

The Concept Core could not speak and it had nothing but memories, but it still seemed willing to go with him.

He nodded and looked up at the crimson sphere.

"Good. Now, let us go. I wish to descend the mountain in a hurry, but I would like your help in that. I believe your main ability is physical enhancement."

He lowered his body in preparation to run downstream.

"I am worried about my teammates down below, Nijun-kun. I want to know if they were successful."

With those words, with the crimson Concept Core, and with a new mystery, Sayama began to run along the river bank.

Wind wrapped around his speedy form and not even his footsteps could keep up with him.

●

Kazami was inside Izumo's hospital room.

The room was dark. The only light was from the emergency lighting, X-Wi on her back, and the moonlight outside the window.

In those dim lights, Kazami sat on the floor and ate.

Her eyes would occasionally dart to one of two places: Izumo who

slept on the bed and the baby who slept on the chair next to the bed.

She dug through the food in the bag Sibyl had brought while trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake the other two.

The rice balls filled her empty stomach. The ones containing tuna mixed with soy sauce mayonnaise had likely been made by Heo. She thought the ones containing a dried plum were from Mikage. That would explain why all of the dried plum ones were of a uniform size.

The salad was all wrapped in vegetables boiled in consommé to help her eat it faster.

The fried chicken was extravagant breast meat. The French fries in the same bucket had a lot of chili pepper on them, but it was so dark she had only discovered that upon eating them.

She had a feeling she would regret this from a calorie and weight perspective, but this was the reward she got for continuing to live.

*Now then,* she thought as she set the thermos of sports drink to the side and sighed.

She reached for Brunhild's letter.

*…Ways to fight the four brothers, hm?*

Just as she began to open the letter, her crossed legs knocked over the thermos which made a loud noise.

"Ah."

Soon, crying filled the darkness.

The baby had reacted to the sound.

To a child that did not understand the outside world, all things were either relief or surprise.

Panicked by the crying, Kazami approached the baby without righting the thermos.

She stood and quickly picked up the baby from the chair. X-Wi reacted to the movements of her shoulder blades as she crouched and the wings of light enveloped the two of them.

Inside the protective cage of pale light, Kazami hurriedly held the child to her chest and gently shook its small form back and forth.

"Um, uh, what am I supposed to do? Stop crying, stop crying…You can't even understand me, can you?"

Even she could not believe what she was saying, but then she realized something.

You were not supposed to shake a baby.

*…You just end up scaring it.*

She was trying to comfort it, but it was nothing more than a never-ending shaking for the child that did not know what was happening.

"In that case…"

*Um,* she hesitated. *Like this, maybe?* she asked herself with her eyebrows lowered in confusion as she moved her own body.

She rocked back and forth along with the baby.

It was a slow, gentle motion like a boat rocking on the waves.

"…"

She did not let the child shake alone. She too rocked in the imaginary waves.

After a few repetitions, she got the hang of the balance needed to rock like that.

This was different from running around and she was not used to using her muscles like this.

The next thing she knew, the white wings were swaying and waving along with her. Their movement was a bit behind her own, so when she moved right, they moved left and vice versa.

At some point, the crying stopped.

The baby's eyes were opened and looking at something. Most likely, that something was the light enveloping them.

Next, the baby's mouth opened.

It opened its mouth in an "ah" shape and squirmed.

Kazami somehow knew what it was trying to say.

*…Are you hungry?*

She slowly crouched down and managed to keep a gentle hold on the child surprisingly easily. She picked up the thermos lying on the floor.

The top was open and some had spilled, but that was not a problem.

*…It would be best for the mother to do this.*

She realized the baby could not drink directly from the thermos, so she silently apologized to the parents.

"…"

She gave the drink to the baby by mouth.

Instead of drinking the warm liquid from her mouth, the baby almost seemed to suck it out.

She held the child's face up to straighten the throat and let the drink into its mouth.

After removing her own mouth, the child expelled some air from its stomach.

*…Wow. It's just like I'd read.*

She was surprised and she belatedly blushed at what she had done. Soon, the baby's mouth opened again.

However, it should have had enough to drink.

"In that case…"

When she realized what the child wanted, she hesitated. She timidly looked around and listened for any noises before hiding the two of them with the wings and slowly opening the front of her shirt.

She forcibly lowered her bra to expose the skin, and wiped her breast with a cleaning charm Sibyl had left for her.

After that, she only needed to bring the child to her while rocking back and forth again.

"Nn."

She smiled bitterly at the ticklish sensation and the bitterness soon vanished.

*…What am I doing?*

With that thought, she stood up.

And she sang. She opened her mouth in the moonlight and light of her wings.

"Silent night, holy night
"Where today all the might
"Of his fatherly love us graced
"And then Jesus, as brother embraced
"All the peoples on earth
"All the peoples on earth."

As she sang, the embarrassment vanished. After all…

*…I'm half-naked, holding a child, pretending to breastfeed, and singing.*

She could not think of anything more embarrassing.

She suddenly glanced to the bed through the gap in the wings. Izumo slept in that bed.

*…A woman holding a child and a man sleeping in a bed at a*

*hospital.*

She laughed quietly as she wondered what that looked like.

She looked down and found the child had fallen asleep. That made her smile a little.

"Thank you."

That was all she said as she wrapped the baby in a cloth and placed it back on the chair. She created a makeshift bed by placing bags upside down on the armrests to make sure the baby would not fall off.

*Now then,* she thought as she looked to Izumo's left arm on the bed and the two weapons leaning against the wall. Her eyebrows rose, she pressed her heels against the floor, and strength filled her knees.

"I'll be going."

She grabbed the maglite from the side table, picked up Brunhild's letter from the floor, and moved to leave the room.

She opened the door and stepped out into the dark hallway.

As soon as she did, she felt a great stillness.

*…This isn't just a lack of sound!*

This was the silence just before something began.

She quickly looked around, but there was nothing to see. Not down the hallway, not near the smashed nurse station, and not through the emergency exit's window behind her.

*…Then where is something coming from?*

Thinking about it in reverse led her to the answer.

*…Somewhere I can't see.*

She instantly remembered that the enemy's attacks could break through walls. That meant he could surely hit her from…

"The first floor!?"

She started back into the room, but at that moment, a line of power raced along the hallway from east to west. It shot by behind her as she turned toward the room's door and it sliced through the wings of light along its path.

"!!"

As her wings scattered from the impact and she approached the door, the entire hallway exploded from below.

●

Ikkou looked up at the destroyed ceiling.

The sound of the explosion passed by and dust flew through the air.

He saw some few remaining floor tiles through the straight line cut in the ceiling.

There was still about thirty square centimeters of floor around Izumo's hospital room, but the shockwave must have knocked the door down because it was gone.

Ikkou heard several sounds in addition to the stony noise of crumbling pieces of the ceiling.

He heard the breathing of a baby as it opened its eyes and did not know what to do. He heard Izumo's breathing in his anesthetized sleep.

And he heard the weak but panting breathing of Kazami.

*…So she survived.*

However, that breathing suddenly stopped and he heard a wet sound shortly thereafter.

He recognized it as someone coughing up blood.

*…Based on that coughing…*

"I still need to finish her off."

He looked to his right hand which held an Azure Dragon Sword with a fresh blade.

He made a gentle leap using only the motion of his ankles. He moved up in front of Izumo's hospital room as if climbing a staircase and he landed on the small bit of remaining floor.

●

Kazami lay face down on the hard floor.

She was not sprawled out or doubled over. Her right arm was extended forward, her left arm was lying weakly outward, and she unfortunately had no idea which way her legs were pointing.

She let out a breath and coughed up some blood. Her breathing was erratic and her body was trembling, but her mind was faintly aware of herself.

She first saw the floor. She then looked forward and saw the shadows cast by the bed and chair.

Her vision was blurry and she guessed it was due to tears.

She wanted to know why she was in this state, so she dug through

her memories.

The answer was simple. Just before the explosion, she had produced new wings with X-Wi.

*…And I tried to block the door as a barrier.*

Izumo and the baby were inside. If she had done nothing, the blast would have reached the room.

That was why she had taken the impact along with the door and the door had slowly collapsed into the room.

"Kah."

As she breathed, something spilled from her throat.

She could not breathe properly and she thought the shock had torn a lung.

She tried to move regardless, but her entire body trembled and she could not gather her strength.

She tried looking around, but she realized her vision was shaky due to a concussion.

Even so, she noticed a haziness beyond the tears covering her vision.

It was dust.

The dust from the explosion was noticeably blocking the light from her back.

X-Wi was still functioning and desperately trying to create its wings, but the small shadows of the floating dust prevented the wings from fully solidifying.

And the dust would also weaken the maglite's beam.

*…This isn't good.*

She tried to stand, but her body would not move.

She felt no pain. She simply felt hot and unsteady.

She could feel her right arm that extended forward and was dyed a dark color from the wrist down.

"…"

She thought nothing about it. Her body was at least intact.

She placed her right hand down, grasped the floor with her palm, and pulled herself forward like she was climbing a wall.

She thought about using her left arm too, but she gave up when she found she could not move it past the shoulder.

She twisted her hips forward and finally managed to forcibly crawl along.

Even that small movement elicited a wet-sounding breath from her mouth.

*…What am I doing?*

She could not fight in her state. Nor could she escape.

Yet for some reason, she crawled.

When she thought about it, it had been a stupid thing to do. If she was taken out, she could not protect the child or Izumo.

*…Why did I try to protect the door?*

She did not know. It had been the only thing to come to mind at the time.

*…That only made the situation worse.*

But she still crawled. She dragged her body forward along the floor. She simply moved while thinking that might bring some kind of answer into view. Soon, she approached a leg of the bed.

"…"

She coughed up a clump of blood and finally started feeling pain.

There was an undeniable something deep in her gut. She felt a cold sense of loss as if something important had left her.

*…Now I've done it.*

*Am I done for?* she wondered.

"I'm sorry."

She formed those words of apology from her breaths that did not quite constitute a voice and she continued from there.

She gave the reason for her apology and why she could no longer protect them.

"I'm…weak."

She had fled her club activities long ago, but she had thought she was stronger after joining Team Leviathan.

What had she said when Sayama had ordered them to disband the day before?

Hadn't she asked why they had to disband when they were so strong?

*…What was I saying? And look where it's gotten me.*

Without the others, she could not do anything, she had lost her weapon, and she was about to lose someone important to her.

Had Sayama understood this?

"You idiot."

Instead of acting tough and full of herself, she should have backed

down there.

She should have done as he said and stayed put at home.

"I'm sorry."

She felt something with her crawling fingers.

It was the former proof of her strength. It was the bottom of G-Sp2.

She had crawled to the wall and the chill of the broken spear seemed to reject her.

She tried to give a self-deprecating laugh, but she gave a bloody cough instead.

She muttered another apology and could tell tears were spilling from her eyes. But she opened her mouth again.

"I finally know just how weak I am."

With something still caught in her throat, she took a deep breath filled with the dust floating near the floor.

"I'm weak."

So…

"That's why I wanted strength."

She grabbed G-Sp2.

She went on to muster her strength and roll onto her back. The wings of light spread along the floor on either side and her hazy vision looked up at both the ceiling and the moonlight entering through the window.

Her position was the same as Izumo's and the baby's. She wondered if she would share in their dreams if she closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

She just about said she could no longer protect them, but a sudden fact came to her mind.

"Oh. That's right."

She nodded and thought about this realization.

*…I want to protect them even if I have to crawl to do it.*

She came to understand her previous actions and her thoughts turned to the boy who slept in a position much like hers.

*…I think I know why he protected me now.*

The moonlight filled her teary vision and she spoke quietly.

"You did it without even thinking, didn't you?"

*…Can I act full of myself when it's for something important?*

With that question, she began to cry.

"Thank you."

And she continued.

"I'm sorry."

She choked and the coughing stopped. Something deep in her throat was preventing her from even breathing.

To fight the trembling that had replaced the coughing, she tightened her grip on G-Sp2.

She apologized in her heart in countless ways.

*…G-Sp2, I kind of understand why you broke now.*

*It was because I was stupid.*

*You flew in to protect me. You didn't simply come because I called for you.*

*…Sorry.*

*I tried to be understanding and I thought you were afraid in that incomprehensible world.*

*But I was wrong.*

*Kaku, V-Sw, and you all had strength and so you weren't afraid.*

*I was the only one that was afraid. And that fear made me misunderstand the power that had come to protect me.*

*That power was supposed to keep me from fearing, but I only saw it as a way of winning.*

*And so I trembled in fear without even winning. If I hadn't been afraid, I may not have won, but I wouldn't have given up or screamed.*

"I was weak, so I only wanted strength."

She apologized under her breath yet again.

Something left her throat, spilled into her cheeks, and spewed from her mouth and her body suddenly felt lighter.

Cold breath reached her lungs, but her body refused to move at all.

*Ah*, she thought when she grasped her situation. She then clenched her right hand and spoke.

"I'm sorry, G-Sp2. But if I do ever become your master again, I won't fear this time. So if I do become your master again…"

She spoke in a quiet breath that no longer qualified as a voice.

"Will you become a power that will never leave someone as weak as me?"

With that question, all strength left her body.

She could no longer move. Her vision clouded over and only her ears seemed to function.

She heard a small metallic noise.

●

A brightly-lit windowless corridor was filled with people moving one way or the other.

Men in lab coats rushed or even ran past walls with BF2 printed in black.

A few men rode a transport pallet moving down the transport rails along the center of the wall's surface. All of them carried weapon storage pallets of different shapes.

"Outta the way! Outta the way! We're transporting the anti-7th-Gear equipment!! If you don't open a path, Director Tsukuyomi will fire her Heavenly Moon Bow into your ass from point-blank range!"

The development department members saying that were kicked to the ground by Tsukuyomi who stood behind them.

The transport pallet continued down the corridor while ignoring the cries of the fallen men, but…

"Ah, stop real quick! …Kashima! What are you doing walking down the corridor like that? I know you know a 7th-Gear concept space was detected."

Next to the stopped transport pallet, Kashima was walking toward the development department.

He stopped when he noticed Tsukuyomi, but he opened his laptop and tilted his head.

Tsukuyomi frowned and stepped off the pallet.

"Hey, Kashima. Are you skipping work to watch videos of your daughter again?"

He turned toward her, wrinkled his brow, and pushed his glasses up his nose.

"How rude, Director Tsukuyomi. You seem to be mistaken about something, so let me be very clear. Videos of my family are what motivate me to do my work. In fact, you could say they are a new nutrient named Vitamin V. Simply put, those videos are a part of my job."

"Yes, yes, yes. We can discuss that further when assessing your pay. Anyway, why aren't you doing anything? You're in charge of G-

Sp2 and V-Sw, aren't you?

"Yes, but both of them are inside the concept space in question, so there's nothing I can do."

"Then come help us. Besides, you're the one that left V-Sw and G-Sp2 in the hospital room because you said we didn't have to fix them. …And now Kazami doesn't have a weapon in there."

"About that."

Kashima glanced down at his laptop's monitor, frowned, and looked back at Tsukuyomi.

"Director Tsukuyomi, one quick thing, if you don't mind. I'm having difficulty judging something here. …Do you understand what this means?"

He showed her the computer monitor.

"Why aren't you playing a video of your daughter or wife?"

"If I watch them too much, the family nutrients are less effective. Anyway… Wait. Why are you giving me that look when I try to have a serious conversation? Please stop that."

"Don't blame us when you make it so unexpected. …Now, please continue."

"Okay, it's about the two graphs on the monitor here. I'm following G-Sp2 and V-Sw's states in real time using their communicators that can surpass a concept space's boundaries."

Tsukuyomi looked at the monitor that had a window opened in the top half and one in the bottom half. Both windows showed several numerical values and a rising graph.

"What? They were both destroyed, so why is their energy rising?"

"That isn't all. Let me show you why I left those two weapons in the hospital room."

Amid the surrounding noise and footsteps, he moved his fingers to revert the graphs to the past.

The graphs now displayed the readings from the previous night when Izumo had been taken to the hospital.

"What is this? Are you sure the sensors aren't broken? This says the values never dropped."

"I inspected the sensors, but they're working just fine. I even replaced them just to be sure, but nothing changed. This means G-Sp2 and V-Sw may have been badly damaged, but they weren't broken."

“What…does that mean?”

Kashima nodded and hesitated before continuing.

“I can only guess, but perhaps the weapons only see their Cowlings as an outer shell. It comes down to the fact that they’re Concept Core weapons. Unless the actual concept inside them is destroyed, they can never be truly ‘broken’.”

Tsukuyomi frowned and Kashima shrugged.

“It’s not even worth it with those machines. Neither of them thinks they’re broken even in that state. They think they can still fight.”

“Why would…the Concept Cores think that? And why are they still broken on the outside?”

“That’s simple. Most likely, they’re waiting for their masters to want to fight again. Those broken-looking exteriors want a persistent master.”

Kashima stuck the monitor out toward Tsukuyomi. The graphs displaying the two weapons’ states had already surpassed 40% power.

“Do you understand what this means? …They’re ecstatic. Those masses of power known as dragons are overjoyed that the one to use their power is waking up. Is there anything we need to do? … And now that we’ve settled that, it’s time for a Harumi video. I’ve got a new one today!”

Tsukuyomi kicked Kashima to the ground and loaded him on the transport pallet.

●

Ikkou saw something after reaching the open door in a single bound.

It was light.

White and black light of unknown origin came from Izumo’s hospital room.

The center of the two colors of light came from the back wall of the small room.

They came from the two giant pieces of wreckage.

With a boy sleeping in the bed to the side, a bloody girl lying on the floor below, and a baby further to the side, the two wrecked weapons scattered shaped fragments of light around themselves.

More and more light appeared like bird wings, leaves, or spraying water.

The light was either white or black and the two colors swirled through the air on the right or left.

The light produced an infinite number of sounds. There were high sounds, low ones, mid-level ones, short ones, and long ones. They all mixed together to produce a humming tune or a pulsation.

Amid that light and sound, Ikkou saw something floating into the air.

It was countless red drops.

*…Blood?*

Kazami's blood rose from the floor and Izumo's blood rose from the bedclothes it had soaked into.

At the same time, a powerful pulsating noise filled the air.

The deep pulse that shook one's body came from the two weapons.

As the weapons produced light and sound, they pulsated and changed the cloud of blood droplets along with the light and sound. They become bird wings, leaves, or spraying water.

The two weapons' identical spirals eventually overlapped and decorated the room with a double helix pattern.

The weapons' pulses accelerated like a human heartbeat and sounded louder and faster.

Light raced through the outer surface and inner core of G-Sp2 and V-Sw.

G-Sp2's was a bluish-white light and V-Sw's was a red light.

As the light raced from the sealed Concept Cores, it filled the cracks in the weapons and corrected their shapes.

Their blades were formed anew, their handles grew smooth, and their Cowlings were purified to white.

Their shapes changed. They maintained their original functions, but grew more angular and solid.

Finally, Ikkou saw light slowly grow in the weapons' consoles.

"We won't lose now."

With a metallic noise, the Cowlings slid on their own to finish creating their new forms.

At the same time, the spiraling light coloring the room changed to a spray.

The room filled with light and swallowed up Izumo and Kazami.

“…!”

Seeing that, Ikkou used all his strength to thrust his Azure Dragon Sword into the light.

●

The second floor of the hospital exploded in the night.

However, the explosion did not occur in the eastern end which contained the hospital rooms. It was in the western end.

Building materials and dust seemed to bounce out of the building more than they were blasted out and two objects followed.

One was Ikkou using a broken Azure Dragon Sword to guard.

The other was a light rising straight up from the explosion.

The light was a giant spear.

The light emitted by its tip trailed behind it in the night sky.

That glowing dust washed over someone who was already wrapped in light.

Specifically, in wings of light.

In the moonlight, the bearer of the spear spread her white wings and slowly took in a breath.

“——————”

She began a power dive toward the enemy below.

●

Kazami did not understand anything.

She did not know what had happened, what she was thinking, or what she was doing.

Even so, she found an answer to that last question.

*…I’m fighting!*

As soon as she landed in the moonlit backyard, she used her wings to charge toward Ikkou who had also landed.

Not even the wind could keep up with her.

Ikkou swung his Azure Dragon Sword, but she did not care.

After colliding with him and making her next attack, she thought.

*…Why?*

She made attack after attack and slid quickly through the air to arrive behind her enemy.

*…Why can I move again?*

The Azure Dragon Sword broke, but a new blade formed by the time she had raised her spear.

*…Why was I forgiven?*

She evaded, spun around, and used the motion to make a jab with the back end of the spear.

*…Why am I still alive?*

Her hair fluttered and her sweat flew.

*…Why?*

She did not know, but she did not know two things for sure. She had been given forgiveness that she would never receive again, and…

*…I can protect.*

“I can protect them.”

She knocked away the Azure Dragon Sword with the back of the spear.

“I won’t freeze up in fear anymore. I won’t stand still and tremble anymore. Because…I won’t think I’m strong anymore.”

Despite being knocked back, the sword was forcibly swung down at her. However, she did not hesitate to hold the spear below her arm.

“So lend me your power. Lend me the power I need to protect someone!”

She used the wings on her back to step forward with her entire body behind the spear tip.

She accelerated.

She cut through the wind and slipped below Ikkou’s blade.

The spear tip sank into the chest of his armored uniform and smashed his bones.

He was thrown back from there.

“————!!”

With a great sound of impact, his body flew backwards.

She brought her feet to the ground and stopped herself. She swung up G-Sp2, spun it in her fingers, and held it under her arm again.

“Sorry…”

Her wings vibrated and produced noise.

“But it seems I’ve become a bit of a better person.”

Even as she spoke, Ikkou spread his legs and landed. The soles of his shoes slipped back along the dry dirt of the backyard and he raised his Azure Dragon Sword again.

“Ha ha. You regained your energy quick-…”

Before he finished, Kazami had circled behind him.

He gasped and shook in surprise, but this was nothing to be shocked about.

It was simple. As long as she used her wings and swung her body, she could circle around faster than him.

However…

“Such speed,” he said.

“Oh? This is my average speed…when facing an enemy anyway.”

“Oh? So I am your enemy, am I?”

“Yes,” she replied.

She raised her eyebrows and pushed the spear tip into Ikkou’s back.

“Or at the very least, you aren’t my teammate.”

She poured all of her strength into a point-blank range strike.

The sound of impact shook the air, but the sound of flapping wings accompanied it.

Ikkou was launched parallel to the ground, but Kazami caught up and calmly made another attack.

“You turned your blade on people I care about. While it is my fault they got hurt…”

The additional hit sent him flying even faster, but she used her wings to soar above the ground and line up alongside him again. She attacked from the side this time.

“You are still an enemy for not stopping your blade.”

She struck him from below to launch him up into the air at a right angle.

He flew around a dozen meters into the sky, but she circled above him in an instant.

With the light of the moon behind her, she pressed the spear tip against Ikkou’s back as he reached the peak of his ascent and briefly stopped.

“Yes, you aren’t my teammate. After all…”

She sent him flying straight down.

However, she accelerated down after him and struck his back again as she caught up.

“My teammates are elsewhere. I may not have any strength…”

She hit him yet again to accelerate him further.

“But they still want me on their team.”

*Yes, that’s right,* she thought. *Let’s go form a team.*

*Not a team prepared only for the Leviathan Road, but a team that will last forever.*

*We won’t think we’re strong anymore. We’ll gather together to become strong.*

*As long as we keep that in mind, we won’t let our guard down.*

“And we won’t lose!”

She activated G-Sp2’s second form and fired the cannon down.

After a direct hit on Ikkou, the ground and the light exploded.

This left a crater ten meters across and the sound filled the entire area.

The hospital building shook and the reinforced glass bent and broke.

With the rising wind washing over her from below, Kazami rested G-Sp1 on her shoulder fifteen meters up in the air.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“You can tell?”

Ikkou stood in the center of the crater.

He was surrounded by shimmering heat, his armored uniform was in tatters, and his hair was a complete mess.

But the light in his eyes had not faded and his weapon was unharmed.

He faced to the side and spat a dark clump to the ground.

“Well done, Kazami-sama. I suppose that would be around sixty points.”

“I’d like another forty beyond that.”

He laughed and sighed.

“It will be too late by the time the battle ends, so I will take this time to tell you of the past we know.”

“The past?”

“Yes, my brothers promised to give you the Concept Core and some information on Japanese UCAT’s past if you defeat us.”

He looked up at her with a sharp look in his eyes.

“Just once in the past, someone took data on our Concept Cores after realizing we had them.”

“…? Just once? Who was it!?”

“Well,” he said. “Someone who was attempting to find a just way to rule the world.”

“What?” she asked.

She did not know what he meant. Was there such a thing as a just way to rule the world?

However, he continued speaking.

“It is fine if you do not understand. I am sure the Army will tell you soon enough. And I have no time. …Kazami-sama, let us prepare the stage for our battle.”

“Sure, but how?”

“How about this?”

Ikkou held something overhead. It was a fist-sized black sphere.

“This is my brother Mitsuaki’s Concept Core. It arrived just now. You know what his concept does, I assume.”

Kazami gulped a bit.

That concept prevented her from understanding anyone else. That had been the trigger to her previous loss against Ikkou.

The man opened his mouth with a smile in his eyes.

“Then let us begin. Working together is the best part of being brothers!!”

With that shout, a voice reached Kazami’s ears.

- —**There is no mutual understanding.**

Those words robbed Kazami of all her senses.

●

After Ikkou opened the concept space, he took a certain action.

He sighed.

The breath contained some blood.

He spat out the clump of blood and wiped his mouth.

*…My end is coming soon, too.*

Mitsuaki had been defeated and there was no response from Nijun or Yonkichi either.

“Give me a good answer.”

He looked up while trying to catch his breath and he saw Kazami sitting motionless in midair.

Her eyes were closed as if in quiet thought, so Ikkou prepared his Azure Dragon Sword.

He prepared an iai strike from below and to the left.

He then spoke to this opponent who could not hear him.

“I will now make the greatest attack I can muster. You can block it if you like and you can deflect it if you like. Either way, I will die satisfied. This is…”

He let out a bitter laugh.

“This is in exchange for all the trouble I have caused you.”

He twisted far to the left, took a deep breath, held it, and sank down a bit.

“…!”

He suddenly moved. He sent his right heel forward, and pushed his body up with his left knee.

“——————”

He raised his right elbow forward, reversed his wrist while stretching his entire body upwards, and stood on his right leg while swinging up the Azure Dragon Sword.

The instant he moved, the blade broke the sound barrier.

*…This will work!!*

His body’s movements linked together and there was no shaking or wobbling in the blade’s path.

There was no hesitation in this attack. He swung it through its entire moon-like arc.

“Ohhh!!”

Surrounded by exploding water vapor and enduring exploding wind, Ikkou used his vertically stretched body to look up at his enemy.

The moon was visible behind the spear-wielding and winged girl.

And a certain sound reached his ears.

It was a song.

Even during the battle, he heard a song in the girl’s voice.

●

Kazami sang in the moonlight.

She sang the same hymn as when holding the baby: Silent Night.

As she closed her eyes and sang with no excess information reaching her, her unheard voice rode on the wind and filled the world.

In her hands, G-Sp2 resonated with the song and vibrated like a tuning fork.

And the song’s vibration in the wind reached her skin.

She could not see the world, but the world came to her. It returned her voice to her.

The earth echoed, the building resonated, and the night sky fell silent, but all of that was the world’s response.

*…Why was I so tense?*

She could not understand others in this world, but there were things she could learn as her own voice returned to her.

She had been unable to do this the day before. Both when faced

with this concept and when faced with Sayama's order to disband.

But she was fine now.

She had learned something.

She knew why she had been so angry about Sayama's order.

*…Back then, I felt like my efforts weren't being recognized.*

*But I was wrong,* she realized while singing below the moon.

Nothing anyone said could change how much she had fought or that she had protected the Leviathan Road.

So her job was to do her very best to protect the others and accomplish something.

If she did that, her efforts would be recognized without her having to point them out.

Sayama must have known that after fighting alongside them so many times.

But he must have sensed their carelessness.

After growing strong, they were relying on their strength, forgetting their original intentions, and losing sight of what they needed to do.

If they merely wielded their power, they would grow intoxicated on that power and end up filled with fear.

He had hinted at this by having them disband, but that was likely because of the approaching battle with the great power of the Army.

*…But I'm weak and my lack of confidence made me lose hope.*

And to hide her weakness, she had relied on her power, but that had made her fear that power, lose, and fail to protect what really mattered.

She needed to trust in something other than strength and she had understood that in the past.

*…Yes, it used to be more than just words. I really did understand.*

Once, she had tried to protect Sayama and Shinjou and led a werewolf to take his own life.

She had worried over that and her decision had been to leave flowers for him and to never forget it.

At the time, she had not tried to justify her actions to anyone. She had not tried to use the werewolf's death as proof of how much her teammates mattered or how hard she had worked.

She had received the sin as the sin it was.

She was stubborn, but she had tried to grow stronger.

But after gaining more teammates…

*…Why did I get so full of myself and grow soft?*

If she stayed like that, her teammates would not want her around.

And that was why she had a new thought.

A teammate was someone to share her joy with as they fought and protected each other.

And they were someone to notice the flower she silently set down and line up their own flowers next to hers.

She had people who would understand without her having to say a word.

*…So I just need to do everything I can.*

She smiled bitterly when she suddenly remembered snapping back at Sayama.

*I'm such an idiot,* she thought as the bitterness left the smile.

*…But it's partly that idiot's fault for always choosing the most eccentric way to express something.*

That had not turned out well. She thought about having a word with him next time, even if Shinjou was with him.

After all, he was a stupid underclassman and he was doing what she had once done.

Long ago, she had injured someone during her club activities and quit the club.

But after meeting Izumo and beginning to fight, she had heard about a certain strange first year student.

The boy had gone to karate competitions, but after injuring his left hand, he had quit karate altogether.

As a replacement for karate, he had searched for a place to get serious and he had ended up alongside them.

There was one thing she had wanted to ask him eventually: aren't you ever going to clench your left hand again?

*…But I'm glad I didn't say it.*

If she had said that when she didn't realize how weak she was, it would have shown how little she understood.

*…That's right.*

*I'm sure he'll figure it out on his own without me saying anything,* she realized.

"Yes."

So she stopped singing and nodded to herself.

"Let's go. It's time we formed a team again."

She could hear where her enemy was, so was that enough to say she knew where he was?

Ikkou launched a straight line of shockwaves toward her.

She responded with a strike from her spear of light.

She was filled with an inappropriate curiosity about who would win.

But…

*…Ikkou-san, you're thinking the same thing, aren't you?*

She also knew what G-Sp2 had to be saying: this is fun.

So she took a midair step and dove straight down.

The silence of the attack below was her path to him.

To resume fighting, she prepared to crush him.

# Chapter 29

## “The First Step”

That walk is swift
That walk is strong
That walk never ends

●

Hajji opened his eyes in the darkness.

The surrounding darkness confused him. He did not know where he was.

He only knew he was sitting on something that shook and he was surrounded by shadow.

*…Where am I?*

He then remembered he was inside a moving vehicle.

He was on the way to UCAT for the attack that night.

He checked his watch and found less than an hour had passed since they had gathered in front of the Takao factory.

He shrugged his drowsy shoulders in annoyance and he heard a woman speak in front of him.

“You sure are calm. You seemed to be having a pretty good dream.”

He saw a large woman in a white combat coat. It was Jord.

She smiled bitterly, but he gave no response and looked around to check on the situation.

The back of the transport truck had been transformed into a hangar and men and women were standing silently along the left and right wall. They were accompanied by another three trucks that would also be filled with pre-battle tension.

In the night, he heard the wind blowing across the truck and the tires racing along the road.

In front of him, Jord opened her mouth to break the silence.

“It certainly is strange to be fighting alongside you. …10th and 9th never got along and, if it hadn’t been for all of you, my friend and daughter wouldn’t have died so soon.”

“I see. I’m sure you’re just angry, but I suppose I’ll ask. Yes. What was your friend’s name?”

“Aley.”

Hajji covered his mouth with a hand and lowered his eyebrows.

“That would indeed be my fault. Yes. A real shame.”

“Well, it was technically due to 9th-Gear’s politicians. 9th-Gear’s king took a holy spear containing half of 9th’s concepts to Low-Gear and died there. That didn’t leave enough power to activate Zahhak.”

“When I returned, I tried to stop Zahhak’s activation for that very

reason, but the palace had a connection to an underground organization in 10th-Gear and they stole Thor's Hammer to use the 10th concepts it contained to help activate Zahhak. Yes, that was quite the commotion."

*That must have been a tough time for the politicians too,* he thought.

*…And after Thor's Hammer was brought back and Shahrnavaz gave up…*

"She combined with Zahhak as its brain to protect me from the false accusations of abandoning the king."

"What? Did you say something?"

"No, nothing. Nothing at all, Jord. That has nothing to do with anyone but me. Yes. …But a group with no one controlling it is always a problem no matter what time period you're talking about. Isn't that right? In the early days, a lot of people in the Army tried to randomly take revenge on UCAT."

"So you purged your own followers, leaving you with the group you have now?"

"That's right," said Hajji.

The truck shook as it turned left and tilted up a slope. It was a long slope leading up a mountain.

"I see. So we've started to cross the mountain leading into Okutama. Not long until he battle now. …With the people here and the doll unit coming later, we should be able to reach the center of Japanese UCAT."

"But how do you plan to eliminate the concepts?"

"I have a way. Yes. And I know where they can be destroyed."

"Where they can be destroyed?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I've only ever heard of it, but the person who explained it actually saw it there. They said we could 'do whatever we wanted' with the concepts if we go there. …And I'm sure UCAT would end up there if they did complete the Leviathan Road."

"Where is that?"

"Why do you want to know? But either way, I will end up talking about that tonight. You can look forward to it if you like. …More importantly, all of you need to think about what to do afterwards. The concepts of the other worlds will no longer belong to UCAT. Your concepts that support your reservations will be the only ones

left.”

As he spoke, the floor shook vertically.

Everyone in the back of the truck lowered down and held their weapons close.

Meanwhile, Hajji continued.

“Once the concepts are taken from UCAT and destroyed and once UCAT itself is defeated, the different Gear reservations will have to adjust from being protected and ruled by UCAT. This will reset the world. I suppose 4th and 8th will fall under 10th’s protection.”

“Are you trying to create a new world?”

“No, we will return Low-Gear to its original form. Once the Gears are no longer held hostage through the Concept Cores and reservations, they can hold proper negotiations with Low-Gear. Yes, that would be for the best. Everything will return to a blank slate and continue from there. We only need to crush UCAT and disappear ourselves.”

The truck sped up and everyone prepared their weapons.

Once the speed lowered and the truck came to a stop, the attack would begin.

As the truck descended to its destination, Hajji held his own weapon and formed a slight smile.

“We are not creating a new world. We are creating what can be called the true world.”

●

Kazami gathered her things in a moonlit room.

She put her half coat on over X-Wi and held G-Sp2 with a bag wrapped around the tip.

“It’s dark,” said the spear’s console.

“Bear with it. I’ll remove it once we get outside.”

She extended a hand toward the corner of the room where two fist-sized spheres floated.

One was blue and the other black.

They swayed as her hand reached them. They almost seemed to be hesitating.

But soon the blue sphere seemed pulled in toward her and the black one followed.

They flew to either side of her and into her half coat’s pockets.

She started to close the pockets, but smiled bitterly and stopped.

"Why do inorganic things seem to like me so much?"

She looked across the room.

The baby was no longer on the chair. She had returned it to its original place before the concept space vanished.

V-Sw leaned against the wall. The armor-covered sword's shape had changed somewhat.

Its console flashed randomly and Izumo slept in the bed next to it.

Izumo's left arm stuck out from the bed. The solid cast on the elbow had broken and a fairly pale left arm grew from there. It was a newly made arm.

"Was that the healing power of 10th-Gear's world tree and the power of destruction and regeneration of 6th-Gear?"

Some things felt a little off inside her own body. Some areas seemed to be moving a little better as if they had been modified.

She looked over at V-Sw and G-Sp2.

"You forgave me just once for not understanding you and losing because of it, didn't you? But the next time I lose will be for real, so that won't happen again. Isn't that right?"

"We are strict."

She smiled a little at that blunt response and looked at Izumo who seemed to be sleeping.

"Thank you. I would have died if you hadn't protected me. And I need to thank the others too. I need to thank them for being with me."

She slowly lowered her head and placed her lips on his.

After some damp time passed, she moved away.

"I'm going on ahead. And remember. From now on, my heart will not go with you. Even when we're walking side by side, remember that I will be hoping to go with you. And…"

And…

"I think I'll try to have more confidence in myself. No matter what anyone says and no matter how much I worry over what my actions lead to, I'll always try to do my very best."

She smiled.

"So I'll always be fresh."

She looked at V-Sw and the words written on the white sword's console.

“See you later.”

“Right.”

She nodded, stepped out the door, and entered the hallway.

She hesitated for a moment but began to run.

The head nurse looked her way from in front of the nurse station.

“Oh, are you really okay? It seems everyone is rushing over here.”

“I’m fine, so please tell them to head back. I’ll go meet them myself.”

She held up G-Sp2 with the bag over it.

The head nurse’s eyes stopped on the weapon and finally seemed to realize it had been repaired. She looked surprised and smiled.

“Do your best.”

“I will.”

Just before she started down the stairs, Kazami spotted someone in front of the nursery window.

*…It’s that child’s mother.*

The woman looked at her just like before.

“Are you heading out? And with some big tool?”

“Yes, well… It’s for a bit of a part time job.”

“Is that so?”

The woman tilted her head but gave a genuine smile.

“The head nurse told me something odd just now. She said you saved my child.”

“I’d say it was the opposite actually.”

“Eh?”

“Oh, and sorry. …I took his first kiss. But I had a reason for it, so don’t get the wrong idea.”

Kazami bowed and the woman looked down at her in utter confusion.

But when she looked back up, the woman tilted her head.

“First kiss? Um, I’m not quite sure what you mean…but my child is a girl.”

“Eh?”

Kazami dropped her head forward and looked the woman in the eye.

“…”

She swallowed her voice and let out a deep laugh.

She doubled over, came to a personal understanding, and suddenly looked up.

She nodded toward the mother of the child who had helped her out.

"Thank you very much."

As soon as she raised her head again, she ran down the stairs.

She skipped one step, then two, and desired to continue on and on.

…*How strange.*

Why did she feel so lighthearted and elated?

Her heart felt like wind. It would sometimes blow violently along, crash into a wall, and smash to pieces, but it would also rise into the air as it freely went where it pleased.

This had to be a time for that positive side of the wind.

"Yes."

As she descended the staircase, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a letter. It was the letter of advice Brunhild had left.

It was a little late for that, but she opened it anyway and found a single line of writing.

"I'm sure an idiot like you will win regardless, so I'm not going to write anything."

"Well, of course."

She quickly jumped down the circling staircase.

She ran outside and into the moonlit night wind.

●

A band of light shined below the night sky.

The light illuminated a long strip of asphalt in a valley between mountains.

It was a runway.

The asphalt covering the three kilometer runway was brand new.

In exchange for the new asphalt, thick walls two meters tall continued along either side of the runway. They were barricades made using the piles of the old broken asphalt.

The top of the barricades had been made roughly flat and a few figures walked along them.

They were automatons wearing UCAT combat maid outfits and philosopher's stones that allowed them to remain active in the

outside world.

They carried machineguns at their waists and they constantly monitored their surroundings with their sight and concept senses.

There were so few of them on patrol because their individual senses could cover a wide area, but they would be replaced by other maid automatons quite frequently. This also helped provide a change of pace since they would otherwise be inside all the time.

They were deployed to more areas than just the runway. Some were in the southern and northern forests and some were in the front of the 1st-Gear reservation to the west.

They patrolled in groups of two, but they did not communicate with their voices.

They handled everything through their shared memory.

“This is 56th Iris on patrol with #57. Nothing to report at the southwestern edge of the southern forest.”

“Testament. Please return. #93 and 94th Camellia are next, so they will take your place.”

“Yes, sir. …What are you working on there?”

“Currently, we are opening up most of the camouflaged building’s third floor and piling up the equipment and explosives in case of an attack. The cafeteria will act as a base and this will be the storage area. To prevent an external attack, the defense shutters have a concept saying ‘—You cannot enter here’ applied.”

“Yes, sir. This is using a lot of special equipment, so I have determined it must be tough. I hear Lady Miyako took command of Izumo UCAT’s mass-production of reflection concept philosopher’s stones to oppose the thought compulsion concept that girl used when she visited UCAT.”

“Testament. Those arrived by air a while ago and have been carried to the third floor. I have determined they will be helpful.”

The automatons used their shared memory to transfer what they saw as data.

Large concept barrier emitters were set up at the four corners of the runway.

The devices had six barrel-shaped metal objects arranged in a circle, they each created an area of gravitational control around themselves, and they prevented large machines from flying. Their effective range was approximately five kilometers. As soon as an

unregistered philosopher's stone reading was scanned approaching through the air, the reading would be taken inside the concept space and sent straight down.

The automatons covered the ground and the barrier emitters covered the sky.

Just in case, a prefab station was set up by the runway. Light still came from the prefab building located next to kneeling gods of war hidden by covers. If anything happened, the god of war pilots could immediately board them.

Negotiations were underway to have other countries' UCATs help with security, but American UCAT's Yokota branch had decided on its own to rush over in an emergency. If anything happened, their mechanical dragons would arrive within ten minutes.

In truth, Japan had wanted American UCAT to remain in Japanese UCAT permanently, but the other nations' UCATs had put a stop to it so that the United States would not gain such an advantage. Unfortunately, that had led to the other nations' UCATs hesitating to help with security now.

They were currently planning to have a meeting on the subject come November.

The automatons were aware of all this and they had their own thoughts on it.

"Yes, sir. This world has yet to unify itself," said one.

"Testament. That means world peace is reliant on our work here."

Happy to be given work like that, they continued to move.

Their vision could see through the darkness and see heat.

However, one could easily hide from that using concept camouflage.

Their greatest advantage was their ability to detect faint philosopher's stone readings while only being the size of a human.

The Army's weapons would be altered with concepts.

During day or night and even when hidden by cover, their eyes could pick up on readings that normal sensors would miss. The effective range of their senses was approximately two kilometers.

Just in case, they formed groups of two. On top of that, the automaton guard groups were given patrol routes that overlapped.

The humans would use sensors and their own eyes from the

runway and building and the automatons would make long range patrols.

If they sensed a philosopher's stone reading, they could send word over their shared memory and immediately have others sent in.

And they worked diligently.

They continued to share a number of words and reports.

"Yes, sir. But is it really efficient for half of us to use 'yes, sir' and the other half to use 'testament'?"

"Then what should we say instead, #93?"

"Why not take the start of one and the end of the other for 'yestament' or 'tes, sir'?"

"I have determined that does not change very much."

"Yes, sir. 101st Lotus here. Then how about the start of both or the end of both for 'yestes' or 'sirtament'?"

"That is an excellent decision, 101st. How about we see what #8 thinks? …#8?"

They all listened to #8's unedited thoughts.

"Listen, Ooshiro-sama. How many times do I need to tell you? You are not going to trick me by pretending to pass out again."

After a while, the automaton that had asked for #8's opinion spoke again.

"Everyone, I have determined #8 is enjoying her job."

"Yes, sir. 101st Lotus here. I will add 'waiting for #8's response' to my remaining tasks. …Oh."

"What is it, 101st? Did something happen?"

"Yes, sir. I spotted a puppy and a black dog. They are wearing collars, so there is nothing strange about-…"

But her voice vanished. The supervisor automaton waited several seconds which was a very long time for an automaton.

"101st Lotus, #100? What is the matter? …I can still detect your presence."

She received a response via their shared memory, but it was not in words.

The response was as follows.

"Woof."

●

The automatons mentally tilted their heads at the voice they

heard and they all mimicked it.

"…Woof?"

After a while, the one who had given that response, 101st, spoke.

"Oh… S-sorry about that."

"Of course…but are you okay? If there is a problem with your memory functions, you can go in for maintenance."

"I'm fine. I think it was just a moment of confusion and we were on our way there anyway. Send in our replacement."

"Your replacements are #75 and #77. They just left, so you should be able to see them from there."

Sudden noise reached them from 101st's location.

It was gunfire.

Immediately afterwards, static ran through their shared memory.

The supervisor shouted out in response to the static.

"#75 and #77's functions are dropping! They have been shot!! This is an enemy attack! Determine the enemy's location!"

After receiving that shared thought, all of the automatons outside headed southwest.

But when they got there…

"101st Lotus here. …Nothing to report."

"This is #98 in charge of the southern area. I have arrived as well, but there is nothing to report. …Eh? …Kh!"

That voice was accompanied by more gunfire.

After another pause, the supervisor spoke without knowing what to do.

"#98 and #99's functions are dropping…"

The automatons below the night sky saw something in the southwestern forest. Their thermal vision saw 101st and #100 aiming their machineguns toward the southern area #98 and #99 had been in charge of.

"Why?" one of them muttered.

At the same time, brief silence filled their shared memory.

They all performed high-speed scans on each other and confirmed their settings.

All of the automatons had been given a certain setting as a family.

"We cannot destroy other automatons of our type and only 1st through 3rd can remove that setting from themselves."

But the footage arriving from the vision of those on the runway

showed 101st and #100 firing their machineguns to the southeast. More gunfire reached their ears.

"This is 108th Sasanqua. We are under attack from 101-…"

The voice cut off there.

This left a single fact.

The automatons with the numbers 101 and 100 were being controlled by some kind of power.

However, none of them could act. They wanted to stop the two of them, but their settings prevented them from destroying their fellow automatons.

But then how could those two destroy them so easily?

They could not find an answer. To change that, they all spoke to the supervisor.

"Send out UCAT!!"

But before they received a response, another voice reached them.

It was 101st's voice.

"Woof."

Their minds froze up when they heard that mimicked dog bark again.

And then they heard it a third time, but that was followed by another voice.

"Ahem. Can you hear me, automatons? Well? Hm?"

"…"

The automatons' minds ground to a halt.

They did not recognize this voice at all.

●

"…"

The automatons could not move.

There were three reasons for this.

First, how had someone else cut into their shared thoughts?

Second, they had no idea how they were supposed to react to this unexpected turn of events.

And third, they could not determine what was going to happen.

What were they supposed to do?

All of them decided they had to tell someone other than themselves about this.

But they could not.

Their thoughts and their shared memory were being locked down by someone else. Their shared memory used machines as an intermediary, but unlike Low-Gear's artificial intelligences, theirs were true artificial thoughts.

It should have been impossible for anyone else to intervene.

That was why their automatic thoughts determined this was some kind of misunderstanding.

However, they also wondered if this could possibly be a misunderstanding.

This was affecting every single one of them, so that left two possibilities.

First, the same misunderstanding had occurred in all of them simultaneously.

Or second, someone had interfered with their shared memory with a method that exceeded their own abilities.

In order to reject the latter possibility, the 3rd automatons decided that no one could exceed their abilities.

And it was also possible to assume a common misunderstanding could occur in all of them at once because they were built on common standards.

Ergo, this supposed fact was actually a misunderstanding on their part.

All of their artificial brains instructed them to ignore the misunderstanding and continue with their work.

But one thought inside them said their conclusion was wrong and the thought process began anew.

Their thoughts looped thousands, millions, and even billions of times. The doubt in their minds was opposing the fundamental decision-making part of themselves.

But their thoughts never reached a definite conclusion and the infinitely looping thoughts left the automatons motionless.

But just before they all froze up, a certain automaton added in a new thought.

"We are excellent."

The 3rd automatons knew what it meant to be excellent.

They had been taught that during the Leviathan Road battle three months prior.

An excellent individual could admit their own defeat, would continue trying to win despite that, and would try to stay at the same level as both winner and loser.

And a doll that could admit to her own mistakes and inexperience was treated kindly by her master.

A certain memory returned to the automatons. It was the memory of one of their own losing and being carried by a human.

That confirmed for them that they could lose and admitting that fact led to a single conclusion.

“3rd’s automatons are excellent. It is unthinkable for all of us to reach the same erroneous conclusion!”

One of them shouted those words. It was weak and not quite a cry, but the one speaking out against her own control had been given an obedient personality.

“So this is the truth! Our minds are being invaded by someone!!”

With those words, all of the automatons came to their senses.

They broke free of their infinitely looping thoughts and awoke.

“…!”

Someone was interfering with their shared thoughts.

And this was not a misunderstanding of a single unit. It was a phenomenon occurring in every single one of them.

Something supposedly impossible was happening.

This was a contradiction, but it was also a fact.

And that fact reached them in the form of words.

“Well done. Yes. An excellent recovery. I would expect nothing less of a product of the Gear of dolls!”

The dolls hearing those words as fact shouted back as one mind.

“Who are you!?”

The individual units had yet to fully recover from the contradictory thoughts, but their artificial minds put up their guard and they stopped moving while speaking to the intruder.

“We demand you free the compromised units!”

“I can’t do that. No, I definitely can’t do that.”

The voice answered without delay and continued before they could say anything more.

“Unfortunately, we have taken control of two automatons. Yes, I’m truly sorry. I really am, but that’s why I would like it if you did not resist. Yes.”

"Who are you?"

"Is saying I'm Hajji of the Army enough? We're on our way there as quickly as we can. So could you form a wall and wait for us? Well? Hm?"

The tone of voice was awfully calm for what it was saying.

And 56th Iris sent out a quiet thought from the southwestern area.

"Emergency report."

She continued.

"We are under attack!! There are 121 of them and a great number of small animals. I have determined the animals are dogs! But…they are thermally and conceptually identical to real dogs and yet I cannot hear a single pulse from the entire group! These dogs are made from high-density information, so I have determined control of 101st and #100's artificial brains was taken by them!"

56th's next words were muffled by gunshots.

"Hurry! Even as we hesitate, the enemy is-…"

Her thoughts cut out and something else could be heard instead.

An alarm blared from Japanese UCAT and a large group of footsteps filled the southern forest.

"…!"

Countless enemies ran into view from that forest.

They were a kilometer and a half from UCAT's disguised building.

●

The enemy was too close.

All of the automatons had that same thought as they began to move.

The time they had spent frozen had been devastating. The fact that automatons from 3rd had been "hijacked" had slowed everything down.

Japanese UCAT's night guards had sensed danger in the automatons' silence and they had come charging out, but even that had been too slow.

The enemy had already left the forest and reached the runway.

"…"

It would take too long for the god of war pilots to leave the station and start up the gods of war.

They had all expected an attack by mechanical dragons or gods of war. They had thought an attack too quick to react to would destroy the UCAT building or grounds and then the Army would come pouring in.

But the Army had begun on foot.

More and more people in black armored uniforms appeared from the forest.

They cut across the lawn next to the runway that contained the station and barricade and they ran toward the runway.

They climbed over the barricade and looked west to see a straight shot to the white building.

They only had to make a run for it.

They had a great number of dogs running at their feet and they were led by an elderly Arab man with a black turban around his head.

101st and #100 accompanied him on either side.

The blowing wind was the sound of late autumn and the elderly man spun his weapon in his hands.

It was a Cowling Spear with a sword-like blade attached.

He held it under one arm, crouched low, and stared straight at the white building.

“Now, let’s get this started.”

The automatons did not move, but he did.

He moved forward and took the first step of a run.

“This will bring the end, so…don’t hold back.”

As soon as he spoke, the battle with the advancing black forces began.

●

A light traveled west toward Okutama starting from a road near a hospital in the mountains.

The light took the form of wings and flew straight up into the night sky.

Two people on the ground looked up at the wings of light.

They stood in front of a vending machine below a streetlight in front of the hospital.

One was a gray-haired woman in a black suit and the other was a well-build elderly man in a white suit.

The woman took a sip from a can labeled “Black Coffee – Extra Bitter”.

“What do you think of tonight’s events, President Izumo?”

“Well, I do want to know what my stupid son is doing sleeping. Don’t you agree, Diana-kun?”

The man, Izumo Retsu, drank from a coffee can printed with a giant abstract image of a professional wrestler.

“But…how should I put it? The Izumo family has always been really lucky with women. Two goddesses in a row and now an angel who can tame a dragon, even if she seemed hopeless for a bit there. Did you see that, Diana-kun? You did, didn’t you? She took care of her opponent so quickly it even shocked me a little. Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

“Are you not going to greet her?”

“Eh? No, it’s best to just hide and watch these things. …And I knew she was going to win anyway.”

“Why would you think that? She almost died.”

“Well…”

He looked up into the whiteness of the moon, but suddenly stopped.

“No, I can’t. If I said anything here, it would sound so cool I’d make myself blush. Ha ha. Give me a break here, Diana-kun.”

“I see you haven’t changed.”

“That’s not really true. I don’t like to admit it, but I’m a lot different from a decade ago. After all…”

He nodded and crossed his arms while still holding the can of coffee.

“I really don’t like to admit it, but…I’ve aged ten years in the past decade.”

“…”

“You don’t get mad like you used to, Diana-kun. That makes this a lot less fun. How about it?”

“I’ve simply learned how to hide it inside. …How to hide everything inside.”

Diana shrugged and turned toward the hospital.

“Are you going to go see the Izumo boy?”

“That idiot will live on even if I don’t. And he can come to me. I need to make sure I don’t die before then, so I have a lot of work to

do.”

“Everyone from the Izumo family is a real pain to deal with.”

“There are other problems, too.”

“Eh?”

Diana tilted her head, so Retsu elaborated with a bitter smile.

“You see, the 10th-Gear reservation contacted me personally. Annoyingly enough, a god named Jord who’s also my mother-in-law seems to have left the reservation.”

“You mean…?”

“She said she’s joining the Army. See, I told you there are other problems. The Army is coming.”

Diana gasped and Retsu narrowed his eyes and looked up at the moon.

“I think I’ll go see just how far my mother and wife’s protection can reach. Just how powerful are the feelings of those two who so loved this world’s moon?”

He held the can up toward the moon.

“And if they end up losing…well, destruction can be amusing too.”

# Chapter 30

## “Meeting Distance”

Everyone says
I can finally see you again

●

The battle began with black approaching white.

The runway acted as the stage. It was an asphalt corridor with two meter walls on either side.

A black army ran down that fifty meter wide path in a dense formation.

In all, there were around one hundred and twenty people in black armored uniforms.

Different colors of dogs ran along with them.

Their boots clattered across the ground, the barking of the dogs filled the night wind, and they all travelled west.

Their goal was the white building one thousand two hundred meters ahead.

“Hurry,” someone muttered even though they were already running full speed. “If we don’t hurry, the end won’t come.”

Someone else cried out in response.

“We have to end this!”

They all trembled and cheered. They sank down and accelerated further.

“We have to end this world and make a new one!!”

Strength filled their cheers and they tore through the wind.

They ran.

They never stopped running.

By running, they worked toward what they desired.

On the other hand, the white army was slow to react. The automatic dolls had been hijacked and left motionless.

Some attacks were coming from the white force, but it was still scattered.

This contrasted with the concentration and speed of the attacks from the black force.

Light shot to the left and right from the black army.

That light reached the people leaving the forest or station by the runway and it reached the anti-air defense field generators.

“…!”

Explosions filled all of those areas.

There was no fire, but countless sounds and pillars of smoke shook the ground and air.

As countless forms were blasted into the air, a five-man team split off from the black army to the left and right.

In the lead, Hajji turned toward them, raised his eyebrows and sounded like he was giving a casual greeting.

“Are you going so soon?”

The man in charge of the first unit on the right turned toward him.

“We’ll be going on ahead.”

The one in charge of the first unit on the left did the same.

“So will we.”

They scattered to the left or right.

“It’s time to fill them with regret!”

They cleared the side walls in a single bound and were met by explosive blasts and gunfire.

The black unit jumping to the right was intercepted by a group of automatons attacking from the side.

Mid-jump, they protected their bodies and heads with their right arms and began firing on the automatons with their left arms.

Their battle began on the grass lit by the flames of a distant burning prefab building.

The automatons seemed to spin around as they ran and jumped. They aimed their machineguns via perfect synchronization between their arms and eyes. They used a smart system that automatically aimed in the direction they were looking.

Their firing was so accurate that they did not waste a single bullet.

The black unit attacked from midair and the automatons attacked from the ground. And they fired.

Between the gunfire and flying sparks, the black unit clacked the heels of their boots together as they began to fall.

With a sound, rolling balls appeared on the bottom of their feet. All those balls did was spin, but…

“…!”

They only had to use the thrusters sticking out from their back armor to achieve great mobility.

As the five prepared to land, shimmering heat rose behind them.

“You can only use the thruster for thirty seconds!” shouted their commander. “Use it intermittently and carefully!!”

“You’re the worst one at using it, commander!”

“That’s why I get such good results!!”

They landed and bullets washed over them, but they let their armor deflect them.

“Our armor is thick! It’s heavy and overheats quickly, but everything ends here anyway. More importantly…”

The momentum of landing pushed the commander’s legs forward and he almost fell onto his butt, but instead…

“Outta the way, dolls!!”

The shimmering heat behind him burst open and his body quickly rose up.

They shot across the grass in an instant. Wind wrapped around them as they shot forward in a gouging arc toward the people returning from the northern forest. Those people were a mix of automatons and other UCAT personnel.

“We’re only interested in fighting the people of Low-Gear!”

The five black armored men tried to slip past the automatons, but the maids ran after them, turned around, and aimed their machineguns.

“We are already a part of Low-Gear.”

“I see. I apologize then. That’s a shame to hear, though.”

A maid jumped over the men’s head and continued forward.

This maid was the hijacked 101st.

She jumped high into the air, looked down on the stopped automatons, opened her mouth with the moon behind her, held a machinegun in her right hand, and held a combat knife in her left.

“————!!”

She howled.

The heavily armored men with prosthetics charged onward as if catch up with the canine howl.

The black army was now one thousand one hundred meters from the white building.

●

The running black army saw a white building up ahead.

As they ran against the wind, a small figure remained in the center.

It was Shino.

Shiro ran at her side, she controlled the dogs with the

philosopher's stone at her chest, and she looked forward past the others.

*…Mikoku.*

Where was she? She was probably near the front, but Shino could only see the color black from where she was. The most she could make out was Hajji due to his height.

*…Where is she?*

They had been in different trucks and she had only caught a glimpse of the girl's back when they had formed up.

They had not spoken much at all for the past few days.

The last time they had spoken was three days before. Shino had brought up today, Mikoku had told her to stop talking about that, and they had gotten into an argument.

But once the battle was over, they could return to their normal lives. And that normal life would be even better than before because she would no longer need to feel guilty about the surrounding world.

*…But…*

She was filled with a vague anxiety.

*…Does Mikoku think the same thing?*

She had wanted to ask her even if only to have something to talk about together.

But there was something she wanted to say even more. It was a bad feeling that formed the foundation of her anxiety.

"When this fight is over…"

She muttered her fear in her heart.

*…When this fight is over, will she stay with me?*

At the moment, Mikoku was definitely out toward the front. She had her back to Shino and Shino could not catch up. Shino raised her speed as if trying to reach the girl she knew was up ahead.

At that moment, she caught a glimpse ahead from behind those in front of her.

The information dogs running ahead on the runway suddenly shook.

"There are land mines!!" she shouted.

But that was not all.

The view up ahead changed slightly.

As everyone tried to stop, something previously unseen was

revealed in front of the white building.

The objects appeared as if a shroud had been removed from the scene.

“Cannons!? Were they hidden with optical camouflage!?”

There were two metal cannons measuring four meters long. They had a caliber of 88mm. Not even a god of war would escape a direct hit unharmed.

They were positioned in order to block the asphalt corridor.

But Shino knew those around her would not slow down.

*…Let’s go.*

As soon as that thought filled her heart, she heard a voice.

“I’m not afraid.”

Everyone cried out, sped up, and rushed forward.

They continued forward and the enemy responded to the sound of their pounding feet.

Two shells tore into the air.

The black army was one thousand meters from the white building.

●

The white army heard the sound of shellfire as they gathered in front of the white building.

It was a great roar.

The shockwave rushed out, struck the air, and shook the building’s windows.

The two horizontal shots reached their ears as a single deafening sound.

The cannons fired explosive shells.

Then again, the metal shells were fired at greater than the speed of sound, so a human body would be smashed to dust before they even exploded. They would only detonate once they struck a prosthetic body part with thick armor.

“!!”

Eight hundred meters ahead, two white explosions rose into the air.

The sound carried into the sky, but as they watched the smoke flutter and scatter in the wind, someone spoke aloud.

“Wait.”

They had all noticed something odd and they expressed it in

words.

“Why did they explode at eight hundred meters? Shouldn’t that have happened further back? They haven’t entered the kilometer long minefield yet.”

“Well…” said someone else trying to find an answer.

However, the answer revealed itself from beyond the smoke. It seemed to throw the smoke off of itself.

First, there was a large woman wearing a black armored uniform like a coat.

Next, there was a girl wearing a tattered black armored uniform.

The large woman threw aside her black armor as she walked and she spoke to the girl next to her.

“Of course it’s gonna explode if you stop it with your sword. Stop it with your body instead of wasting a perfectly good weapon.”

“Does it bother you that much to fight alongside someone so young, Jord?”

The girl skillfully removed her shoes as she walked.

“Let us make a game out of this.”

“Fine, Mikoku. I’m nice, so I’ll play along. And the rules are right in front of us. Do you understand?”

“I do. …It is a simple game: who can reach the other side of the minefield first? It’s an eight hundred meter dash. Or is it an obstacle course because of the shells? …But I am young, so I will do it barefoot.”

Jord began running even as Mikoku spoke.

“Th-that is cheating! That is a false start!”

Without looking back, Jord poked at her head with her right index finger.

Mikoku began to run as well, but she did turn back.

She saw the troubled look on Hajji’s face and shouted to the others.

“We will make a path to the entrance, so run, everyone. And let us all charge right in!”

Additional shellfire sounded as if answering her and multiple explosions came from Jord up ahead.

The black army was seven hundred meters from the white building.

●

The advance of the black army could not be stopped.

The woman and girl smashed the shells and the ones who jumped to the left or right stubbornly drew the gunfire.

There was no reason for the black army to slow as they ran down the center.

They simply had to continue on.

When they finally arrived within six hundred meters, a noise seemed to envelope the runway.

This was the rumbling of new boots running their way.

They all saw units of UCAT guards returning from the surrounding areas.

The footsteps came from the eastern end of the runway, the southern forest, and the northern forest. Approximately one hundred people arrived from each of those directions.

Those from the north and south came to crush the two small black units fighting there.

The ones from the east pursued the black army from behind.

Mikoku and Jord continued smashing the shells and literally racing across the minefield, but the two small black units drawing fire to the north and south were in serious trouble.

The white force arriving from the north first attacked the hijacked automaton named 101st.

“If possible, don’t hit her head!!”

The other automatons could not attack, but the men fulfilled their request.

Those in white armored uniforms ground their teeth and used their gunfire to smash the bones of the growling automaton.

Their bullets pierced her maid outfit and split her limbs and torso.

“————!”

She fell to the grass, but by that time, the hundred-strong force of white gunmen was already turning to the men in black armored uniforms.

The horizontal downpour of bullets acted as multiple weights to push back and destroy those heavily-armored prosthetic-enhanced bodies.

“What…”

The group in white shouted out as they ran forward.

“What are you hoping to accomplish!?”

The group in black shook from the impact and smiled despite not even having time to attack.

But behind them, the black army was only five hundred meters from the white building.

The small group in black spoke as they heard those footsteps and gunfire.

“Did you hear that!? They asked what we hope to accomplish. You all know what to do about that, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

The five-man unit was surrounded by gunfire and filled with pain, but they opened their mouths.

"Ha ha!"

They laughed. Even as they curled up to ensure their bodies did not fall apart, they let their loud laughter carry across the ground as if it were an attack.

Immediately afterwards, gunfire sounded.

One of the men in the black unit had his arm armor blown off.

He lost his balance and was blown backwards by a bullet to the side of the chest.

He rolled along the ground and ended up sprawled out there, but…

"Ha ha… They don't get it. They really don't get it!!"

"What don't we get!? Or… Do you really think you can win here!?"

"We can win."

He sat up but took a bullet to the gut and collapsed forward.

He lay face down and trembled, but that was because he was laughing so hard.

"Ha ha. You're going to lose. That's a foregone conclusion. You're going to regret defeating us. …And that regret will be your loss and make you disappear. So go ahead and feel regret, lose, and disappear."

"Don't be ridiculous. How could regret make us lose and disappear?"

"Do you know why the blank period was created?"

No one could answer that question.

The main black force was now within four hundred meters of the white building. Shellfire and gunfire shook the air to stop them and the fallen man in black armor stood up.

"You don't know why it was created, do you?"

Despite his question, no one allowed him to continue.

Gunfire rang out in his direction, his armor was blasted away, and it all reached him as solid impacts.

But…

"Ah, such wonderful pain. Such wonderful shaking. …It's all proof that you fear the past."

Bullets hit him and sparks flew, but he did not go down. He cut

the sense of pain in his prosthetics, removed their power limiters, and affixed a smile on his bloody face.

“Let’s end this together, allies of justice. That’s probably the happiest outcome for this world.”

One man in white swapped out his submachine gun’s magazine and asked the other man a question.

“What’s the point of hiding your reason for this!? Why hide it!?”

“Weren’t you listening? We need to fill you with regret. Telling you comes much, much later. Once most of us have been defeated, Hajji will tell you.”

“Why…then? Are you here to die? If the past you’re talking about is that serious, why not tell us now so we’ll surrender!?”

“That wouldn’t bring enough regret. …You need to defeat more and more and more of us. Then, when you think you’ve won, we’ll tell you just how wrong you’ve been. Now, gather your strength and defeat me. Prepare for your future worry! Otherwise, my defeat will be meaningless!!”

His cry was punctuated by gunfire from behind the white force.

Only after several people collapsed did they turn around.

Their eyes opened wide when they saw who stood there.

“An automaton?”

One of the automatons following them had her machinegun aimed at them.

One of the men in white frowned toward her.

“W-wait. There weren’t any dogs over here.”

“Woof.”

After a single gunshot, that man collapsed.

A cool breeze blew in and the gunfire stopped.

All that remained was he sound of white armored uniforms striking the ground and the smell of smoke rising from the muzzle of the automaton’s machinegun.

The black army had arrived within three hundred meters of the white building, but no one here could move.

Unable to breath, they saw a sudden tremor run through the automaton.

Her eyes refocused and she gave a look of surprise.

“Eh? Um, what was I just doing?”

No one should have been able to answer her, but one person did.

It was a man in black armored uniform with thin smoke and shimmering heat rising from different parts of his body.

He spat bloody saliva to the ground and smiled.

“You know mad dogs are contagious, right? Well, it turns out they can infect others via shared memory.”

“You can’t mean…”

“Oh, but I do. I’m sure you automatons won’t want to hear it, but those information dogs have gotten used to your shared memories and are running around working for their master. …Look.”

With those words, some light appeared.

The red light rose from the third floor of the disguised Japanese UCAT building.

●

An explosion rose into the air.

The exterior of the disguised Japanese UCAT building’s third floor was blown away by the color scarlet. It was the color of flames.

The third floor was being used to store the combat materiel to fight back against an attack.

That area midway up the building’s white wall was blasted into the sky with the sound of an explosion and the color of fire.

It was burning.

The black army was two hundred meters from the white building. As they continued to approach, the fourth and fifth floors of the building went dark and all of the windows spewed smoke into the sky like upside-down waterfalls.

Next came the destruction.

First was the noise. The noise of shaking wind, of crumbling building materials, of something still exploding, and of human cries of pain and fear.

With the support of the third floor gone, the fourth and fifth floors crumbled downward.

The building collapsed.

The fourth and fifth floors remained intact, but they tilted and crushed the north end of the lower floors and finally collapsed northward under their own weight.

Everyone heard the glass and other materials dumped to the ground.

The ground shook, dust made of building materials rose into the night sky, and smoke rose from the top of the disguised Japanese UCAT building that was now only two stories tall.

A man in a black armored uniform watched it from the north end of the runway and broke the surrounding silence with his laughter.

“Ha ha. You will lose through your regret, but you’ll also lose for real. Disappear from this world, UCAT.”

The men in white moved quickly in response.

The black army was now one hundred meters from the white building.

However, the reinforcements from the east were catching up, so the men in white here let out a shout while pulling their triggers.

“Then we’ll make sure nothing remains! Not even the regret you speak of!!”

“You should probably talk to them about that.”

Without bothering to avoid the bullets, the man in black armor pointed a trembling hand to the east.

The white reinforcements were running down the runway from the east. They were the guards who had returned from the surrounding areas.

However, other figures were approaching from even further back.

They were all feminine, they were all the exact same height, and they all had the exact same face.

“Automatons in black maid outfits?”

“No, they aren’t automatons. They’re just dolls. …There are three hundred of them. This is the army to announce the end.”

As if responding to those words, the group in black maid uniforms began to run.

Their approaching footsteps were light, but they sped up and reached a sprint.

At the same time, they prepared the weapons they wore on their backs.

Some had metal shields, some metal spears, and some metal bows and arrows.

The black maids split into three groups of about one hundred each.

Two groups approached the white forces on the left and right

sides of the runway and one pursued the white force chasing after the Army on the runway.

They were already firing arrows which seemed to scream as they tore through the wind.

At the same time, the rear third of the Army's main force split off.

They turned around to pin the approaching white force between them and the dolls coming up from behind.

They let out war cries as they clashed.

The three groups of white reinforcements all had an enemy to face, so they could not pursue the Army's main force.

The Army simply had to rush in at the white building now.

Due to the minefield on the runway, the white army had no choice but to set up a barricade at the runway exit and intercept them there.

One side ran and the other side waited to receive them.

As soon as the battle settled into that arrangement, the man in black armor narrowed his eyes and laughed again.

"Ha ha. My role ends here."

He collapsed onto the ground behind him.

Strength left his eyes as they looked up into the night sky. Smoke rose from explosions and began to hide the moon.

"I guess you can find light anywhere."

But his eyes did see light.

It was an aircraft dropping down from the heights of the heavens.

A blue and white mechanical dragon was performing a power dive toward them.

An instant later, the blue and white dragon broke through an explosion of water vapor on its straight path for the ground.

It was after the black maids to the east.

It dropped through the night and sounded like it was tearing a hole in the wind.

At the same time, the Army's main force completed its race down the runway.

The distance between the two sides had reached zero.

The arrangement of the battle changed from the black charge to the white interception.

●

Thunder Fellow made a midair transformation to his close-quarters combat form and opened his mouth as he dropped down.

As the light of his main cannon built in the back of his mouth, he first looked to the west.

A familiar building was in an unfamiliar state there.

When he saw the white building with smoke rising from it, a voice came from his external speakers.

“H-Harakawa, the disguised building was-…”

“Don’t panic, Heo. Panicking won’t turn it back to normal.”

In the cockpit, Harakawa aimed the main cannon west. He wanted to fire on the Army’s main force while they were still relatively high up, but…

“I can’t! UCAT’s interception team is too close.”

“We can still aim for the black dolls down below!”

“Right.”

He nodded and spun them around so they fell headfirst.

They were approximately one thousand meters above the ground.

From the falling cockpit, he saw a river of brand new asphalt cutting east to west through the dark grass.

That was the runway.

It was so large that it did not seem to approach even as they fell so quickly.

But Harakawa calculated their speed from the fall time and altitude and then opened his mouth.

“Heo, once I fire, twist your entire body and land. Jump west from there, accelerate in midair, and fly above the disguised building at supersonic speeds. Got that?”

“Eh? Why should we fly above the building? Shouldn’t we help the others?”

“How can we join that mess of a fight in something so big? We need to blow away the burning part of the building with a shockwave and then secure UCAT’s back entrance The lifts on the sides of the runway aren’t running to prevent anyone from getting in that way, but I’m pretty sure there’s a lift for sending out gods of war and the like in the back too. From what I’ve heard, the god of war belonging to that Sibyl woman was sent out through there during the battle with American UCAT.”

“…”

“What is it, Heo Thunderson? Do you have anything to add?”

“No, um… I was just thinking that you’re pretty reliable.”

“That has no bearing on our plan. Plus, you’re imagining it.”

He realized the main cannon was pointed straight down and they were already less than three hundred meters from the ground.

An explosion of recoil would reach them when firing the main cannon, but he had learned the close-quarters combat form could withstand it back when they destroyed Black Sun’s additional twin fuselage wings.

“I’m going to fire! Heo, focus the armor forward!”

“Oka-…!? Harakawa!”

Harakawa did not question her shouted response or the fact that the armor did not move.

Heo always had a reason when she failed to carry out her job and called his name.

He instantly realized he needed to fire the main cannon in a hurry.

“Rotate the armor to the rear!!”

He raised their downward acceleration and fired the main cannon.

“Go!!”

He had made the right decision, but he was too slow.

Thunder Fellow’s armor pointed toward his waist and the back of his legs to defend against an attack from behind. A moment later, something from the northern sky hit his waist.

It was a weak blast, but the red light had flown straight in from the side.

It was a solid hit.

●

“!?”

To protect Heo who had no idea what had happened, Thunder Fellow closed his rear accelerators on his own.

The internal heat instantly turned the accelerator shutters bluish white, but they blocked the red light and prevented it from reaching the internal components.

The blast still blew away a few panels of armor and blasted Thunder Fellow into the southern sky.

The main cannon was thrown off target, but there was no stopping it now.

It fired.

The white light hit the eastern end of the runway instead of the black dolls.

It then swept along the ground and its scorching heat diagonally chopped down countless trees in the southern forest.

The great force of the white light as it swept along the ground and forest was enough to tear the grass and trees from the ground.

And a moment later…

“!!”

The earth and forest struck by the main cannon blasted into the sky like a series of geysers.

Dirt, crust, and trees flew over two hundred meters into the night sky.

As that destruction instantly rose up like a wall, Thunder Fellow rapidly fell.

He entered a leftward tailspin and fell toward the southern forest.

“Kh!”

In the cockpit, Harakawa’s vision followed Thunder Fellow’s motions.

“Get up!”

He forcibly lifted the nose toward the sky, but it would not fully pull up.

The spin ended, but the downward momentum remained and Thunder Fellow slipped quickly toward the ground while tilted on his side.

“But we can pull this off somehow!!”

While the ground approached from the left, Harakawa opened the closed left side accelerators and used their full acceleration.

He tried to kick the aircraft forward as it prepared to crash into the ground, but the close-quarters combat form had weak acceleration.

Harakawa tried to point the nose up and to the right, but the momentum down and to the left was still stronger. The resultant trajectory was an arc that would tear into the forest to the left.

At this rate, they would crash into the trees and come to a stop.

*…Just like this morning!*

Suddenly, he heard what sounded like Heo taking a breath.

"Don't worry!"

A moment later, Thunder Fellow's body floated.

His body went through a series of jumping motions as his legs kicked off the ground.

His back left leg forcibly kicked to the right along the ground speeding by below. His rear rose and his nose sank down.

He used that motion to bring both front legs to the ground and then kick upwards.

He began to run.

Once he started accelerating and racing forward, he could no longer fall.

The mechanical dragon cut past the people fighting south of the runway and drifted just above the forest.

Branches and leaves struck the left-side armor and scattered, but that was all.

He ran straight forward just a few dozen centimeters above the trees.

"We can do this!!"

Heo's joyous voice was immediately followed by a sound from the ground behind them.

Several large blasts were striking the ground one after another.

"Is this what hit us before!?" asked Harakawa.

This was their enemy.

Something was pursing them from the sky behind and firing horizontally on them.

Just as Harakawa wondered who it was, it charged in from behind.

It was a mechanical dragon.

It was painted red and blue with points of white added and its sharp face was turned their way.

"Ha ha ha! Mechanical Dragon Alex, the Ally of Justice, has arrived!!"

The mechanical dragon named Alex opened his mouth.

Red light had already gathered in that maw of metal.

His voice rang out during his high-speed flight just above the forest.

“Special Attack! Censure Beam – Alex Breeeeeaaaaath!!”

Thunder Fellow determined the time lag just before the red main cannon was fired and used his leg strength to fly up into the air.

After a beat, the color red shot by below.

It tore through the forest and destroyed the spare disguised building in the distance.

Just as the roar passed by below his stomach, Thunder Fellow let the wind wash over him and faced upwards.

“!”

He changed to his normal cruising form.

He made full use of his rear thrusters and began a vertical ascent with torque-filled acceleration.

Power built up for just an instant, but the literal moment of acceleration arrived immediately afterwards.

Thunder Fellow flew toward the heavens.

The forest visible below instantly grew to an ocean of trees and Harakawa clicked his tongue within the intense Gs of acceleration.

“Dammit. What was with that enemy!? But we should have lost him. That stupid mechanical dragon looked like a non-transforming type, so he can’t accelerate right after firing his-…”

Reality betrayed Harakawa’s words. The blue and red dragon rose from below, calmly lined up to their right, and then reduced his acceleration. He was saying that his acceleration was even greater than theirs.

“Impossible!”

But Harakawa saw the answer to his confusion.

Alex’s back, chest, and waist were covered in additional accelerators and additional tanks filled with rocket propellant.

“Whether it’s firing your main cannon or whatever else, do you leave it all to brute force!?”

“Justice must have strength!”

Alex immediately continued with anger in his voice.

“But you have exactly the kind of skill I would expect of the evil organization’s generals. After all, you dodged my Alex Beam!”

“U-um, wasn’t it Alex Breath? Also…”

“What is it, girl?”

“Of course we’re going to dodge your attack when you shout its name in advance.”

“Don’t be silly!!!”

Alex sternly rejected that idea. He clenched his front right leg into a fist that trembled with great strength.

“You clearly know nothing of the world, girl. Did the evil organization strap you to a chair, put a headset on you, and brainwash you!? Listen, girl. I will give a logical explanation. It is true that your opponent can avoid your attack when you shout its name, but why must an ally of justice make a surprise attack by not announcing his special move? Even a war begins with a declaration of war!”

He raised his front right leg.

“That is why an ally of justice must train hard! He must develop an attack that cannot be avoided even when you shout its name and strike a pose! He must develop an attack that is sure to hit, no matter the situation!! That is what makes a true special attack! But you just avoided mine. Not only does that mean that you are an excellent foe, but it also means- …Hey, wait! Where are you going!? Our discussion of justice is not over yet!”

Thunder Fellow turned his back on justice, spun around, and descended.

Their opponent wanted to fight from relatively close range, so there was no point in switching to his high-speed cruising form that focused on top speed. They would need to use normal cruising form or close-quarters combat form, but Alex had greater acceleration with his additional accelerators.

But they had an overwhelming advantage when it came to durability and tight turns and Alex’s own weight would affect his movement up or down. They also had an advantage when it came to stopping in midair because they were lighter.

If the enemy was pursuing them, they could build up speed, come to a rapid stop, and let him shoot out in front of them.

That was their plan.

But as Thunder Fellow began to drop, he heard a voice from overhead.

“Oh, I get it! You’ve realized you don’t stand a chance, so you are trying to run. …Then take this!!”

Strange intro music played in the sky above. It was filled with static as if it had been taken from an old cassette tape.

“New Special Attack! Explosive Destruction – Alex Ciiiiiircus!!”

Harakawa saw Alex transform overhead.

No, this was not a transformation. Most of the armor panels on the top of his body opened and missiles appeared underneath.

If they were fired, the attacks would pour down like a waterfall. Even if they avoided them all, the damage to the surface would be devastating.

“You idiot! Your own people are down there too!”

“You don’t understand, boy. Missiles avoid the just!!”

He prepared to fire, but an attack stopped him right before he did.

A white line had flown in from the southern sky.

“!?”

After the strike to his stomach armor, Alex covered the missiles with his armor and immediately ascended.

“Ambushing is a cowardly act!”

He directed his voice to the south and Harakawa looked in that same direction.

He saw a black form with wings. On its shoulder was a girl holding a giant cannon.

“Hiba and…Shinjou!!”

●

Susamikado entered the dogfight.

Or rather, it forced its way into it.

In the windy sky, Alex rose above Susamikado and opened his upper armor again.

“Begone, ambushers! …Special Attack! Countless Explosions – Alex Missiles!!”

A flower blossomed in the sky before Susamikado could react.

The radiating flower was made from the propellant smoke expelled by hundreds of guided missiles.

All of the missiles immediately curved toward Susamikado, twisted around, and shot forward like salmon swimming upstream.

Susamikado accelerated. It curved upwards to prevent Alex from escaping and chose a path that brought the missiles after itself.

The light missiles burning their propellant were faster than the giant flying with its metal wings.

A few of them collided with each other and exploded, but most of them drew hundreds of lines through the air, trailed smoke behind themselves, and pursued the black wings.

“Kh!!”

Susamikado repeatedly flapped its wings and twisted its body.

Its speed and position looked like it was falling into the heavens as it rotated to face the approaching missiles.

A moment later, the pursuing missiles were hit by something and exploded.

This was due to Shinjou on Susamikado’s shoulder.

Ex-St rested on her shoulder and her fingers were placed on the weapon’s side trigger.

“This isn’t easy when it isn’t Tiger Star!!”

Susamikado avoided the missiles at uniform speed while Shinjou brushed her fingers across the trigger to scatter intercepting shots.

The white shots flew overhead, to the left and right, and down below. They struck the approaching missiles and destroyed the warheads flying forward as if to strike them.

She shot them down.

Their bodies and their trails of propellant smoke twisted and they blossomed with flames as if to decorate the sky.

At the front of it all, Susamikado flapped its wings to accelerate and kicked its feet to control the wind. When a missile flew into a hard-to-target spot, Shinjou would twist her own body and sometimes even rotate all the way around.

They had destroyed over half of the pursuing barrage, but countless others broke through the fiery explosions.

But Shinjou continued to fire. Her sweat flew into the sky, her clothes whipped in the wind, and she moved about.

Similarly, Susamikado created explosions of air behind itself to accelerate.

It was under strong enough Gs that not even Mikage’s gravitational control could negate it all, but she made sure to provide perfect gravitational protection for Shinjou.

In the weight of those Gs, Susamikado swung its body around to avoid the missiles and forcibly swung its left hand toward those approaching warheads.

Amid the surging noise of the wind, Shinjou ran out to the end of

that extended hand.

As if stepping out onto a stage, she spun around and ran atop the hand while firing into the entirety of the heavens.

"…!"

She opened her mouth, closed one eye, and used her kinetic vision to locate and fire on each and every warhead.

A chain of fiery explosions filled her entire vision as a wall of flames.

Most of the guided missiles were damaged and burst.

Next, Ex-St's barrel let out a sound like it was exhaling and white smoke burst from it.

The barrel had overheated and burnt out.

But the enemy had not been eliminated. Several white lines of smoke broke through the flames and flew their way.

Their numbers had dropped below triple digits, but this was the final pursuit. Like snake heads rising to strike, they spiraled and trembled in their approach.

Shinjou instantly took in a breath. She held Ex-St in her left hand and turned around. She also swung her body to the left and held her right palm forward.

"Bomber!!"

Susamikado matched her movement by swinging its right hand.

"Keravnos!!"

A deafening noise came from its right arm.

A concept space expanded around the arm's exterior and Keravnos's parts appeared in their disassembled state.

First, the rear attachment arm, bottom frame, and five shock absorbers appeared. Next came the acceleration thruster, attachment arm, and upper counter heads to hold in the guiderail.

Five spears of light appeared and the eighteen metal bolts jabbed into the other parts to bring it all into shape.

The harmony of metal fitting together rang through the sky.

"————!!"

A swing of the arm struck the empty air. A three hundred meter wide blast of lightning instantly shot from the tip of Keravnos. The missiles struck the lightning and were smashed to pieces.

Countless fiery explosions filled the light.

It looked like a wall of light.

Seeing and hearing all that, Shinjou gave a relieved smile and waved a hand toward Susmikado's face.

"I'll leave the rest to you."

She took a light step and jumped down from Susamikado's shoulder.

Hiba said nothing and neither did Mikage. They understood. Thunder Fellow was below and they all knew he would catch Shinjou.

So Susamikado immediately faced the mechanical dragon several hundred meters overhead.

"Nnn! Not once, but twice!? This time, I will not go easy on you!!"

"Sorry, but isn't that the villain's line?"

"Hm? Ryuuji-kun, what do you mean?"

"You saw that rerun last night, didn't you? Y'know, that robot anime Getterman about the three villains who use a combining robot powered by Dyna Rays to destroy the underground people. Last night's highlight was 'Eye, nose, and mouth!'."

"Hm. Boy, you seem to know a bit about justice!"

"No, not that much. …More importantly, you should probably look to the east."

Alex did as Hiba suggested.

Susamikado also checked in that direction where it saw around a dozen flickering lines of air.

"So American UCAT's mechanical dragons have arrived. After that, their transport planes and trucks should bring soldiers to-…"

Hiba never finished speaking.

Fire blossomed in the night sky.

A dozen flames appeared at the front end of the flickering lines of air.

"The mechanical dragons…"

They had all been shot down at once.

Why was obvious at a glance.

At some point, a white form had appeared in the sky where those twelve dragons had been.

The giant god of war had six white wings.

"Typhon," muttered Mikage.

But that was not all. Below Typhon, a group of three large figures was visible on the Okutama mountain road leading to UCAT.

Instead of gods of war, they looked like black armor placed on a giant doll framework.

"Dolls?"

A slight tremor entered Hiba's voice and a female voice reached him from Typhon's shoulder.

"That's right. They're remote-controlled dolls. I'm not controlling anything other than Typhon, though."

"Miki…"

"C'mon, Ryuuji-kun. Didn't I tell you I'm going by the name Tatsumi here?"

Tatsumi smiled and raised her right hand toward him at shoulder height. Typhon responded by flapping its wings and drawing the twin swords sticking out from its shoulders.

Tatsumi smiled and Hiba asked a question through the wind and to that smile.

"What is the meaning of this!? Why are you going by the family name of Nagata!?"

"That may be your mother's maiden name, but it is also my real name. And…you will soon see why I insist on using it. Hajji and the others will make their way into UCAT before long."

"The field operations division led by Abram is at UCAT. Do you really think they can get inside?"

"Just watch. Hajji is about to make a bit of a speech. That should get them inside. And after that, he will give a second speech. …That speech will tell the whole truth."

With those words, Typhon accelerated. It quickly approached and the three dolls walked along the surface.

"Not long now until you know the truth and reasons behind all those mysteries. Why are we here? Why are we enemies? What are you? What happened in the past? And…on which side does righteousness fall?"

Just as Typhon raised the swords in its hands, she spoke with a smile.

"Don't die before you get to hear it."

The sound of the collision was the ring of metal.

●

Below the night sky, a brawl of gunfire and clashing swords had

begun in front of a white building that had lost its top.

A group dressed in white armored uniforms fought a group dressed in black armored uniforms.

They were defending or targeting a single thing.

That thing was the white building's entrance. The lobby beyond contained a staircase and elevators to the underground area.

The evacuation of noncombatants was complete, the elevators had been stopped, and the stairs were shuttered off, but the black army pushed onward as if to say they could manage despite that.

Many had fallen, but they pushed on all the harder for each and every one that did.

The white army leaving the building to meet them was almost entirely made up of those who had been on the first two floors.

The main entrance to the underground area was closed and the large lifts on either side of the runway were still sealed off by their explosion-resistant hatches. They enemy had appeared so close by that they could have gotten in through the hatches as they opened.

But there was one place that underground reinforcements could reach them from: behind the building.

An underground elevator for carrying materials was located between the building and the vegetable garden.

The elevator lift was approximately five meters square. It was large enough to carry a standing god of war.

After completing their preparations, a unit led by Sibyl and her god of war had risen from the deepest underground area.

The gunfire and shouts beyond the building told Sibyl the battle was still underway in front of the building. She smiled and turned toward the men in armored uniforms who had come with her.

"You defend this place while I head out front. A god of war should help intimidate the enemy near the entrance. …And Abram-sama should be out front."

As soon as she said that, a roar passed by overhead.

She initially thought it was the wind, but two aircraft had already flown by into the western sky.

*…Thunder Fellow is in a dogfight with the mechanical dragon known as Alex!*

Thoughts raced through her head, her eyebrows raised, and she filled with relief.

She was relieved that Team Leviathan was fighting and that the rest of them would be gathered here before long.

And her prediction was soon proven at least partially correct.

Two people approached from the direction in which the building had collapsed. One was Shinjou holding Ex-St and a wicker basket while she supported the other person.

“Arnavaz-sama!?”

Arnavaz was dragging her right leg.

Shinjou then noticed Sibyl.

“Sibyl-san! Arnavaz-sama is hurt! She was in Abram’s room on the fifth floor.”

“I’m glad she isn’t more hurt. That must be because the collapsed portion mostly maintained its shape.”

Sibyl gave a look of relief as she and the others welcomed in Arnavaz and Shinjou.

“Are you hurt too, Shinjou-sama?”

“No, I’m fine. Thunder Fellow carried me here, but I’m more worried about them. They’re being chased by a strange mechanical dragon. …Also, there’s this.”

Shinjou lifted the wicker basket along with Ex-St.

The basket contained Baku and…

“It seems this photograph is from the early days of UCAT. Heo gave it and Baku to me because she said they weren’t safe with her, but what do I do with them?”

As she spoke, a low sound like fluttering cloth would occasionally reach them from the sky above.

Arnavaz trembled at that sound of explosions.

“The sky is roaring.”

“Testament. Do not worry, Arnavaz-sama. Abram-sama is fighting. …Shinjou-sama, you head underground with Arnavaz-sama. Ooshiro Itaru-sama has ordered that we fortify the sixth basement.”

“The sixth basement?”

“Testament. That is the Concept Core storage space and…I do not know the details, but it is said to hold a sealed concept space facility. It is most likely from the blank period.”

Shinjou opened her eyes wide but soon raised her eyebrows and corrected her expression.

She then asked a question.

“U-um, what about Sayama-kun? Is he still not back?”

“Unfortunately, he has yet to arrive. Nor have Chisato-sama or Izumo-sama.”

Shinjou’s eyebrows twisted at that.

Arnavaz must have noticed the change to her mood because she turned to her.

“He will certainly be here.”

“B-but…”

“Yes,” said Arnavaz. “He is your Fereydun, isn’t he? Then he will be here to take your hand.”

She held Shinjou’s hand between her wrinkled hands.

She did not say much and she only supported her hand, but after a while, Shinjou’s expression changed with the distant gunshots in the background.

She took a breath, slightly raised her eyebrows, and nodded.

“You’re right,” she said more to herself than anyone. “He’ll be here and he’ll try to show off when he arrives. That’s just the kind of idiot he is. …Ah!”

Her surprise came from something in her hand.

Baku suddenly poked his head over the edge of the basket, jumped down to the ground, and ran off.

He ran toward the front of the building that had become a battlefield.

“I-it’s dangerous over there!!”

She reached out a hand but could not reach him. Baku did not even look back as he vanished around the corner of the building.

“Ahh.” Shinjou took a few steps and her shoulders shook. “Wh-what do I do?”

“Testament. You can only hope for his safety, but I have determined his dangerous journey is only one-way. He has likely caught Sayama-sama’s scent from somewhere nearby.”

Shinjou turned around with a look of surprise and Sibyl smiled.

“Please head underground, prepare the equipment you need, and defend from there. We will fight here to ensure Sayama-sama can reach you.”

Still smiling, she raised her hands and had the silver god of war do the same.

“Head out!!”

# Chapter 31

## “A Small Amount of Truth”

There is so little of it
Because it is so important

●

Hajji was so very close to the white building that had lost its upper floors.

The front entrance was not open.

But they did not need to get in through there. They could always shatter the lobby glass, break a window, or blow a hole in a wall.

But the enemy was numerous and reaching the building would not be easy.

*But,* thought Hajji.

*…A stalemate on the battlefield is interesting too!*

"———!!"

He cleared the center of the roundabout in a single leap on his way to the white building.

He was surrounded by the white army, but he was already on the move.

As soon as he landed, he knocked aside the three men in white armored uniforms standing in front of him.

His steel spear bent, split their clothes at the chest, smashed their armor, and sent them flying.

Three impacts rang out in quick succession and the three of them bent back and flew through the air, clearing the way ahead.

*Originally, I was going to say it here,* he thought. *I was going to tell them we would forgive them if they withdrew.*

But he did not say it.

Instead, he spun on his heel and used the rotation to knock away the approaching enemies.

He rotated a full three hundred sixty degrees.

The next sound was that of the men forcefully charging his way being flung away from him.

But he faced forward without even glancing in their direction.

"So you're here."

Hajji powerfully raised his spear overhead as he spoke.

A moment later, the metal spear shaft deflected something upwards.

He knew what it was it had deflected: a spear tip someone had sent his way.

He also knew who had done it. In fact, he could already see the

person swinging a spear down in front of him.

"So you're here, Abram Mesam! And is it just me or are you not using B-Sp? Hm?"

"That weapon should not be used on human opponents."

"I see," said Hajji with a nod.

And immediately afterwards…

"Do you think you have room to go easy on me!?"

He deflected Abram's metal spear toward the heavens.

Abram jumped back and Hajji leaped after him.

Abram landed first, gained solid footing, and jabbed his spear forward.

"!"

Hajji twisted around in midair.

He dropped his right heel on the back of Abram's spear tip.

He timed it exactly right and successfully kicked Abram's spear tip down and into the asphalt.

The metal loudly smashed the stone.

Hajji landed while holding down Abram's spear tip with the bottom of his foot.

He also used his momentum for a spear strike on Abram's face.

The attack pierced through the wind.

This was enough to gather the attention of the others fighting around them.

Some called Hajji's name and some called Abram's name.

Carried by those voices, Hajji's spear flew straight for Abram's face.

Abram turned to the side to avoid it.

The spear tip grazed his cheek as it flew past him.

Abram then did something one normally never did in armed combat.

He let go of his spear.

"…!"

He grabbed Hajji's spear with both hands and pulled while also sending a kick toward Hajji.

"Nh!"

Hajji forcefully doubled over.

However, the kick never reached him.

As if pushed by the wind caused by the kick, he bent backwards.

"…"

And he too let go of his spear.

He stepped back and stomped on the spear tip below his right foot.

The tip acted as a fulcrum, so the spear stood up and stopped right in Hajji's waiting hand.

By that time, Abram had turned around the spear he had stolen and begun an attack.

Hajji blocked the attack and continued blocking.

He blocked four and then five attacks. After the number grew to eight and then nine, he did something else.

He smiled.

But this went beyond the corners of his mouth rising. He opened his mouth wide and bared his teeth as if to bite at something.

"Ha ha! It's been a long time since I've smiled like this!!"

Pushed on by his own words, he powerfully deflected Abram's spear with the back end of his own.

He no longer hid his smile behind a hand.

The look on his face was of pure joy.

"I hate to admit it, but it's you! It has to be you! Yes, you are my enemy!!"

Abram did not answer.

Those fighting around them answered in his stead. They found small openings in their own battles and sent their gazes and voices toward those two.

Cries of their two names repeated again and again.

As everyone watched on, the two spears trailed white threads of water vapor and their feet and attacks shook the earth and wind.

In just an instant, the two of them moved several dozen meters. In an even shorter amount of time, they sent out countless attacks and sparks.

Their armored uniforms flew behind them and the soles of their shoes left their tread patterns on the asphalt.

The area in front of the white building had become a combat space no one but them could enter.

Hajji heard voices calling his name.

He heard voices calling his enemy's name.

*It's been so long,* he thought. *It's been sixty years since I was*

*cheered on like this.*

*…Wonderful.*

“Wonderful!!”

With that cry, he drew out all his strength.

He fought.
He heard a sound.
He did not hear it with his ears.
It was the pulse of the battlefield.
The sound did not truly exist.
His heart knew this sound.
It showed him the battle.
It showed him the lies, the truth, his opponent, and himself.
It began with footsteps.
The pounding boots rang loud.
The footsteps reverberated through his entire body.
The sound of the wind stimulated his emotions.
The sound of a blade cleared his surroundings.
The sound of guns pierced through the area ahead.
And he heard the pounding of his heart.
That pounding became a voice.
The voice asked him to settle this.

The impacts as they clashed, the bright sparks, the sharp will to fight, and the pressure of being a leader all filled him with joy.

"But Abram, how about we bring this to an end?"

He attacked again and again and listened to the many roars of impact.

"Can you trust the voices that support you?"

Abram did not answer that question, but he replied in a different way.

He began a ferocious offensive.

"————!"

Metal collided, Hajji was pushed back, and he could not help but fall back.

He raised his eyebrows and saw Shino watching worriedly in the distance. Mikoku purposefully had her back to him where she fought to the south. Jord was looking his way as she fought.

He felt as if they were all asking him what he would do.

He knew exactly what he would do.

This attack led into his opponent's special attack. He had been on the receiving end of this left and right barrage about sixty years ago.

He had continued to defend and decided to wait for the other man to grow tired, but a sudden attack had come from below.

That was when he had lost his eye. His frantic counterattack had taken the other man's eye.

He believed he was more skilled, but something bothered him.

*…Back then, I panicked and attacked.*

He had defeated thousands or even tens of thousands of opponents, but a single unexpected attack had filled him with fear.

Skill did not come down to a simple matter of victory or defeat. They had received equivalent damage, but…

*…I lost that fight.*

Hajji shifted from defense to offense. He moved quickly and sought nothing more than a swift and accurate strike.

"Ohhh!"

He cried out and their attacks clashed. In that instant, a memory resurrected in the back of his mind.

It was coming.

He sensed the same attack from below as in the past, but…

*…No!*

He shook free of the past and moved on reflex.

Up above.

He sank down and held his raised spear over his head.

An intense impact rang through the raised spear shaft.

It was a heavy strike that seemed to drive him into the ground, but he withstood it.

He clenched his teeth, endured, and confirmed something a moment later.

*…I just broke through that unpleasant past!*

He held the spear up in a short grip like it was a sword. He swung down the tip like a sword blade to slice Abram's head in two.

But that was when he noticed something.

Abram's metal spear was still bending as it pressed down, but the man let go of it with both hands.

●

Abram made a split-second decision.

Inertia had bent his spear, so he could not immediately pull it back. Instead, he let go of it.

He then grabbed the spear Hajji had a short raised grip on.

"…!"

He grabbed the spear shaft and forced it down. He poured all of his weight and strength on it.

Hajji's hands seemed to be bringing his own blade down on himself.

It was a single-edged blade, but the area near the point was sharp enough to cut if it was lowered in a straight line.

With a scraping sound, the eyepatch covering Hajji's left eye was cut through in an instant.

It also split his left shoulder and sent a flash of cutting light from his chest to his waist.

The blade found flesh.

The slicing sound filled the air, the spear left Hajji's hands, and the black army cried out as if gasping.

"General Hajji!!"

But Abram faced Hajji without turning toward the others.

He picked up his own spear and looked to the man who had fallen

to his knees.

*…So it ends here.*

At that very moment, Hajji's collapse suddenly stopped.

Abram noticed that Hajji had fallen into a sitting position before collapsing.

To keep the cut shallow, he had leaned backwards while escaping downwards.

Blood flowed from the slice in his black armor and his left arm was not moving, but he got up.

"You're too soft. …Didn't I tell you to finish someone off when you defeat them?"

Abram looked Hajji in the eye. In *both* eyes. The right eye was black and the left…

"It exists…but it doesn't, does it?"

Hajji spoke as he got up from the ground.

"This is a copy of the concept held by Shahrnavaz…by Zahhak who you destroyed. The concept sealed inside the holy spear Barmayeh was the bright flame of motion, so the concept inside Zahhak was the deep darkness of stillness. Everything seen by this eye is brought to a stop, but it all breaks to pieces because it can't endure it."

He gave a brief pause.

"Receive the gaze of Shahrnavaz who was always watching you!!"

Abram leaped back just as an impact covered his entire body.

●

Shinjou heard Hajji's shouted words as she took the elevator to the third basement.

She was worried about Abram, but a question occurred to her as well.

"The gaze of Shahrnavaz who was always watching you?"

The way he said it suggested he was close to this Shahrnavaz person.

But what did that have to do with Abram?

*…It can't be.*

She frowned and glanced over at Arnavaz.

The woman stood perfectly still and said nothing with her eyes closed. She faced forward just like Shinjou and almost seemed to be

ignoring the girl.

Shinjou hesitated, but pulled a photograph from the basket in her hand.

She unfolded quietly it so Arnavaz would not notice and looked to the people of an older era.

She saw Sayama Kaoru, Hiba Ryuutetsu, Siegfried, Thunderson, Rhea, Toshi, and Chao. The man facing the other way in the far back was likely Kinugasa. And…

*…Director Abram is…*

As she searched through the photograph, an unexpected voice reached her from the side.

"I'm sure he is in that photograph."

"Eh? Oh, um, sorry!"

"Hm? There is nothing to apologize for. …That is a photograph of the early days of UCAT, isn't it? My Fereydun from before I met him should be in there."

"Yes," agreed Shinjou.

There were quite a few people there in addition to Sayama's grandfather and his group. A well-built Arab man stood in front of everyone's luggage and she assumed he was Abram.

But Arnavaz continued speaking while still facing straight forward.

"He was known as a hero. He was a doctor, he had bad eyes, and he was far too skinny to fit the image of a 'hero', but he was still a true hero who saved many lives as he worked endlessly for the people."

"Eh?"

Shinjou gulped, looked to Arnavaz, took a breath, and looked back at the photo.

Her stiff body saw someone in the photo that matched Arnavaz's description.

At the side of Sayama's grandfather's group was a skinny Arab man.

He had short hair, he wore a brown coat, and his glasses were looking up toward the sky.

*…If that's Abram, then he's a completely different person from the current Abram.*

Then what was the current Abram?

She was dumbfounded and Arnavaz stood next to her.

The woman continued to face forward, she said nothing, and her expression remained calm.

*….Why?*

“Arnavaz-sama, you’ve noticed, haven’t you?”

She did not answer Shinjou’s question, but she did speak.

“Things are so noisy up above.”

Noise seemed to answer her words.

It came from the battlefield beyond the large shaft overhead.

●

Abram jumped back and Hajji realized he had escaped the range of his vision.

However, his armored uniform was torn and the right knee he had bent for his jump had failed to escape and shattered.

The air between them also shattered, creating a vacuum wave.

Hajji’s gaze did nothing more than stop everything in its range, but stopped objects were brittle.

If the air was stopped, it solidified and the faint movement of the surrounding air would push, bend, and finally break it.

Abram was blown further back by the vacuum wave and Hajji forcefully stood to pursue.

The spear he had held had returned to his enemy’s hands.

He picked up the spear Abram had abandoned in midair and that was originally his.

Instead of running, he made a single quick leap to close the distance with Abram.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw people looking at him after hearing his words about Shahrnavaz.

He noticed that most of them wore white and he decided that was perfect.

Before revealing the whole truth, he would break down a ridiculous falsehood.

“Listen. Listen carefully!”

He brought his right leg forward and swung his spear up from below.

“This man is going by the name Abram, but he is actually Sarv, king of 9th-Gear!!”

He felt the blow land as he spoke.

"9th-Gear once joined with 3rd to invade Low-Gear. During that mission, the king was betrayed by the politicians, separated from his comrades, and badly injured by a spy."

Abram was knocked to the right with the sound of breaking bone.

"Everyone thought he was dead, but he actually survived thanks to the medic that all of you originally referred to as Abram! And…"

As Abram flew through the air, Hajji circled behind him in a single step.

He also twisted his body and swung his spear.

"The real Abram died during the battle that destroyed 9th-Gear, but for some unfathomable reason, this man took on his name!! To fully take over the man's identity, he even married his fiancée!"

Hajji hit Abram's back with a horizontal strike.

"Your original fiancée, my sister Shahrnavaz, was made into Zahhak and then killed by you! And after betraying me, my sister, and our world, did you forgot all about your past and wish to live in happiness!?"

Abram flew toward the white building's entrance and Hajji ran after him.

"It is time you lost!!"

Hajji launched his spear tip toward the giant man's back.

The metal blade sank halfway into the armor on his back just as his body crashed into the disguised building's front entrance.

The large glass door turned pure white in an instant.

The impact to the entire surface of the bulletproof and explosion-resistant glass utterly destroyed it.

As if opening a hole in the spray of glass, Abram's body tangled with the door frame and flew inside.

He did not stop even after breaking through the lobby counter.

His giant body and his white armored uniform broke through the cement storeroom wall in the back and disappeared.

The building shook from the continued destruction and more crashing sounds continued afterwards.

As he listened to all that, Hajji raised the spear in his right hand.

He looked to the expanse of darkness leading underground.

"The entrance to the truth has opened!!"

He looked behind him and to Shino.

She stood away from the fighting on the distant southern grass and she squeezed the blue philosopher's stone hanging from her neck.

She closed her eyes and hid the growing blue light with her hand.

"Please believe us."

As soon as he heard her speak her compulsory will, Hajji discreetly took a breath.

The chilly wind entered his lungs, strength returned to his eyes, and he spoke his words.

"Listen, UCAT."

After making sure his voice was working normally, he spoke in his usual tone of voice.

"The truth I just revealed is no more than a preview. Realize that you are fools who were tricked into being led by an old enemy. Yes."

He said "listen" again as those in white stiffened as if scolded.

This was the power of Shino's philosopher's stone. After seeing Abram's defeat, her will could more easily reach them.

Fully aware of that, Hajji spoke.

As he did, he saw the three large dolls walking along the distant east end of the runway.

"Don't worry. Defeat isn't a bad thing. Just die and you won't have to think about any of that. Yes. …But we will never forgive you even if we see you lose. You understand nothing and yet you think you're in charge of this world, don't you? Hm? Therefore…"

He swung down his raised spear forcefully enough to hear it slice through the air.

"The main force will come with me. Let us go change this world. And everyone else… Mikoku!"

Mikoku turned around and he gently narrowed his eyes toward the surprised black-haired girl.

"Protect Shino while taking care of the fools here. You don't want to leave behind any regrets. Isn't that right? Hm?"

"…!? Father! I will head down with you!"

"No."

He shook his head and gave her a smile with clenched teeth.

"Didn't you hear me? Don't leave behind any regrets. So secure our escape route, Mikoku. This is fierce battlefield and the enemy will be pushing in from outside. So you protect the entrance so none

of them can get in and also protect Shino. …How about it? Can you do it?”

She no longer protested.

Instead, her shoulders drooped and her eyes closed.

But a moment later, she trembled and filled with strength once more.

“You won’t listen to anything I say when you ask multiple times like that.”

She opened her eyes and turned her sharp gaze his way.

He looked her firmly in the eye and had an honest thought.

*…She’s gathering too much strength, but that might be just right for now.*

*Don’t force yourself,* he thought but did not say.

He simply smiled and did not hide it with his hand.

“Will you do it, Mikoku?”

“I will. I cannot disobey an order from our leader.”

She finally nodded.

Next, she held her drawn sword in her right hand, raised the blade for him to see, and opened her mouth.

“Get going, father. And good luck. I will be waiting here, so hurry back.”

“I will.”

He used the same words she had and turned his back on her.

He used his hand to instruct his unit to follow.

“I’ll be going. …It’s time to have some fun filling you all with regret.”

●

A white corridor said BF4 on the wall.

Three people ran down the center of the long white passageway.

Two were a young and old man both in a lab coat and one was a maid with red hair.

The young man opened his laptop toward the maid.

“You see, Japanese UCAT’s underground area is currently being split in three using concept space corridors. It splits up the pathways the enemy can use and makes it easier to intercept them. And this is Harumi sleeping this morning. …Did you see it? Then, #8, your role will be…”

“Testament. Kashima-sama, after I escort Ooshiro-sama to the fifth basement, I will join my fellow automatons because the enemy’s dog ghosts might be able to reach our brains even underground.”

Her voice was calm and Kashima nodded in understanding.

“I see. But where are those dog ghosts now?”

“The one that possessed #100 transferred to one of us on the third floor. We captured that one when it was wandering around after the explosion. However, the dog possessing 101st learned from that experience and has managed to escape even when its host was destroyed. We do not know where it is.”

There was a possibility of the automatons betraying everyone, so they were all closing themselves in a concept space.

#8 then looked to her right hand.

That slender hand was latched onto an ear and that ear was connected to Ooshiro.

The old man was flopping around like a fish as she dragged him along the floor.

“Ah, ow! This really hurts, #8-kun! What on earth did I do wrong!?”

She thought for a moment and quickly returned her expressionless gaze to him.

“Testament. You are alive.”

“Living is a crime now!?”

“Ooshiro-sama, living is not a crime, no matter what I might think …And I have determined your current state is better than dying while enjoying yourself on the fifth floor. It was fortunate for you that you were so hungry you snuck down to the cafeteria. Now, please hurry. …And Kashima-sama, will you be heading out to fight?”

“Yes, I will be defending a point along the route. I just hope no one too powerful comes my way. Also…”

He smiled bitterly.

“The one who really likes to show off has already gone outside.”

#8 nodded at that.

Those two ran and Ooshiro was dragged until they finally reached the intersection where they would part ways.

Once they stepped out into it, Kashima alone turned to the right.

“I’ll be defending up above. You work hard too.”

“Testament. But telling me to ‘work hard’ is meaningless. 3rd’s automatons always do their very best.”

“My apologies.”

Kashima smiled, bowed, and turned his back. His pace soon grew to a run.

#8 returned the bow and continued down the corridor while half dragging Ooshiro.

The path ahead continued down to the fifth basement.

A group in white armored uniforms approached from up head. They were armed with anti-tank rifles. When they saw Ooshiro being dragged, they stopped, saluted with a smile, bowed, and laughed.

“Tch. He’s still alive.”

“How can he be so shameless?”

“Why does #8 have to be with someone like him?”

“I-is that really what you should be saying when you see me!?”

The men ignored him and continued on.

As they disappeared behind them, the white corridor grew completely empty.

A slight sound could be heard overhead.

The corridor shook along with it and Ooshiro looked up at the ceiling.

“Hm. From the sound of that, I’d say they’ve gotten in. What do you think, #8-kun?”

However, #8 did not say “testament”.

She expressionlessly let go of his ear and gave a different answer.

“Woof.”

●

As #8 barked, a handgun came from her right sleeve and assembled in midair.

She then pressed the muzzle against Ooshiro’s unmoving forehead.

She targeted a vital point from point-blank range.

Ooshiro looked up at her with the end of the round cylinder pressed against his forehead.

She looked down at him with a blank look on her face, so he pressed his index fingers against his cheeks and tilted his head.

“Oh, #8-kun. You sure do love your jokes.”

A gunshot rang out.

●

The gunshot echoed down the corridor and a hole appeared in the wall.

The hole was created by the handgun held by the maid automaton named #8.

Ooshiro had been her target, but he had dodged the bullet by sliding his upper body to the side.

He went on to quickly hold his palms out toward her.

“Nwah. That’s a harsh response for my cute mannerisms, #-…”

She pressed the handgun against the left side of his head next to the ear and another gunshot rang out.

The bullet should have penetrated the side of his head, but he crouched down to avoid it.

“W-wait a second, #8-kun. If you’re going to act like a dog, at least wear dog ears.”

She pressed the muzzle against the top of his head and suddenly fired.

But he stood up while bending half a step backwards to evade.

However, her gun kept coming.

“Ah, wait. Is this, um, really what happens when an automaton is being controlled!?”

She answered his powerful question, but not in words.

“Woof, woof, woof.”

Multiple gunshots sounded and they did not stop.

She pulled the trigger, repeatedly altered her aim, and produced constant noise from the full-auto slide mechanism.

Ooshiro continued to dodge by raising his hands, stretching, sliding to the side, getting on the ground, and even striking a pose with his arms wrapped around either side of his head.

Once the number of fired bullets reached the capacity of the magazine, he stuck his right thumb out toward her.

“All right! Now you won’t have to shoot me!!”

Her rebuttal was to pull a fresh handgun from both her sleeves.

“Th-that’s not fair!! And one in both hands!?”

“Woof!!”

Bullets flew from both sides now.

Gunshots and sparks blossomed again and again with her skillful manipulation of the guns.

The muzzle flashes illuminated Ooshiro like a strobe light as he performed a high-speed dance.

“Yeeeeaaaahhhhh! It’s a one-man show time!!”

He scattered sweat, spun around, and struck a pose, but he spun again when more bullets flew his way.

She soon ran out of bullets, but she used gravitational control to bring in a new magazine.

He continued to spin and dance while she provided more gunfire with skillful speed.

“Uuhhh!!”

Her eyebrows rose and she tried to shoot him from a variety of angles all while never letting up.

Suddenly, two people arrived from the end of the corridor that Ooshiro and #8 had come from.

Ooshiro spotted them while dodging.

“Oh, Arnavaz-kun and Shinjou-kun! …Um, Sh-Shinjou-kun! Could you help me?”

He was dodging bullets and dripping sweat as he asked, but Shinjou only tilted her head.

She seemed confused and she looked back and forth between him dodging and #8 firing.

After a while, she stared at #8’s furrowed eyebrows and spoke.

“Oh, I get it.”

She lowered her shoulders and sighed toward Ooshiro.

“You did something weird to #8-san again, didn’t you?”

“Ahhh!! You don’t believe me!? If these hit me, I’ll die!!”

“I see. …But I’ve wondered for a while if you’d really die if a bullet hit you.”

“Sh-Shinjou-kun! That’s just rude! Of course I’ll die if a bullet hits me!”

“You’ve never even tried it, so stop making things up.”

“If I tried it, I’d die!!”

Shinjou frowned and looked away.

She then sighed and pulled on Arnavaz’s hand.

“Arnavaz-sama, we need to hurry. Everyone is waiting.”

She put on a fake smile, pulled on the woman’s hand, and passed by behind #8.

Ooshiro continued moving around amid the gunfire and he clapped his hands below the right leg he had raised to dodge.

“#-#8! C-can you seriously wait just a moment!?”

Shinjou had begun to leave, but she turned back and angrily glared at him.

“This is your punishment for making her mad. I think it’s in your best interest to be scolded every once in a while.”

“I get hit all the time, but this is different!!!”

But Shinjou ignored him and continued pulling on Arnavaz’s hand. Arnavaz turned back and bowed, so he bowed back and had a bullet graze the top of his head.

Shinjou and Arnavaz disappeared down the corridor, but the sounds of gunfire remained.

Suddenly, #8’s expression changed and her eyes began to focus once more.

“Woof. …Oh, Ooshiro-sama. I greatly apologize. I have

successfully created an isolated sector in my brain and regained control of my mind- woof! …But it is still not perfect."

"Th-that's great, but can you stop firing!?"

"Testament. I have determined that is impossible. …Woof. I had to enclose my mind in an isolated sector to secure that territory in my head. If I leave that sector, control my mind will likely be fully taken. That is how dense this dog ghost is. Explaining the details of the systems involved would be lengthy, but I would like to prove my innocence in this matter."

"I don't care about your innocence, so just do something already!! If you don't, there are going to be some tears! From me!"

She frowned while continuing her skillful usage of the guns.

"Why do you always make light of automatons and make such irregular statements?"

"Th-that doesn't matter! You can tell me this later!"

"Testament. But I cannot stop. That said, there is one way, Ooshiro-sama. Why not try letting one shot hit you? The dog ghost might give up or regret having shot something so detestable."

"Just to be clear, you've been aiming right for my head for a while now! A single hit will kill me. M-more importantly, how many bullets do you have left? Surely you don't have any left up your sleeves."

"No, but just to be sure, I prepared some in my skirt and beneath my apron, so I can keep this up for another three hours. …But I must admit it is a shame that I must kill you."

"Don't be so certain that's going to happen!!"

His shout was followed by three sounds.

Two were #8's handguns running out of bullets. And the other…

"Did you just hear a strange sound from my back? Something like a dry branch breaking?"

"Testament. I have determined it was a 'crick' sound. …Woof."

Ooshiro could no longer move while she swapped out the two handguns' magazines.

She used gravitational control to cock them and pressed them both against his forehead.

"I have determined this is unfortunate. However, it is the presence of unfortunate things that makes the future seem so very bright."

"Don't twist this into a positive light!!"

She ignored his shout and squeezed her fingers.

But just before she did, he cried out again.

Instead of screaming, he shouted a certain special word telling her not to move.

“Stay!!”

●

No gunshot filled the corridor.

With the guns still pressed against his forehead, Ooshiro looked left and right and then at the person past the guns.

He looked at #8 who had stopped moving.

“…#8?”

“Woof.”

She did not move, but it seemed the dog was still inside her.

He thought about why she had stopped and found the answer in about five seconds.

He lightly clapped his hands and said another word to her.

“Sit.”

#8 looked utterly confused as she quickly crouched down to the ground.

She stopped with her hands out front and her knees raised, just like a dog.

She looked up at him, stuck out her tongue, and panted. If she had a tail, it would probably have been wagging.

“I see. …This must have been a well-trained dog.”

He gave an impressed nod and #8 frowned.

“Ooshiro-sama, how long are you going to have me sit here?”

He slowly crouched and sat down while holding his back.

“That’s a very good question. You’ve been pretty mean to me after all.”

“Ooshiro-sama.”

Hearing his teasing tone of voice, she frowned and the dog ghost made her bark.

The bark was telling him to stop sitting down and start petting it, so he nodded.

“Do you want me to pet you? Hm?”

“No, I do not- woof.”

Hearing her bark, he reached out and pet her head.

“Good girl, good girl. You’re so cute, Dog #8. You don’t disobey me or bite me or anything.”

As he continued to pet her, #8 looked down and spoke in a low voice.

“Ooshiro-sama, I must request that you remember this.”

“Hmm. Are you sure you want me to remember this? For example, what if I did this?”

He held a hand in front of her face and she completely stopped moving.

She frowned, stared at his hand, and started to turn away, but…

“Nn.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and turned back toward him.

Next, her trembling tongue slowly stuck out from between her lips.

“Kh.”

She licked his hand once, twice, and then thrice.

Ooshiro nodded.

“You really are a dog.”

But as soon as he said that…

“Ee.”

A trembling tone escaped her threat as she backed away a bit and hung her head.

He watched in confusion as she gave a large frown in her canine sitting position.

“Hyah.”

A sudden drop of water spilled from her open eye.

Ooshiro frantically scratched his head and tried to soothe her.

“Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry. I guess I went a little too far. …You automatons don’t like anyone but your master to touch you, right?”

“Testament. I do not have control of my body, so it could not obey my rejection circuits. That caused an error in my head which I do have control over, so this was merely an activation of my sight device’s cleaning function. It was in no way caused by an emotional response.”

She forced her head up, returned her expression to normal, and slightly lowered her head again.

“With an automaton, such a drop of water is not a tear, so do not worry about it.”

“I see,” said Ooshiro as a sudden thought came to him. “#8-kun, I just had a thought. Do you mind?”

He picked up one of the handguns she had dropped and held it out toward her.

She tilted her head and sniffed it, but he pulled it back and…

“Go fetch!”

He threw the gun down the corridor.

The dog literally left her body.

It was a black hound with a collar mark around its neck.

It was over eighty centimeters tall and it ran out in front of #8’s widened eyes.

Its footsteps were audible, but it had no shadow. It picked the gun up in its mouth, gave the same bark that had come from #8’s mouth, and turned back toward them with the bottom of its feet skittering on the floor.

It returned to them with the gun in its mouth.

“Ah.”

After coming back to her senses, #8 lifted her hand to eye level and realized she could actually move her hand.

“I have determined this is good,” she said expressionlessly.

She wiped the corner of her eye and sat more normally on the floor.

The dog returned next to her, but she had already sealed off her brain.

She took the gun from the dog and it gave another happy bark.

A tremor reached them through the ceiling as the two people and one animal gave a sigh from the floor.

#8 held the bottom of her apron against the corner of her eye and then pet the dog next to her.

“If Shinjou-sama is here, then Sayama-sama will not be far behind.”

“Do you really think so? And we probably shouldn’t tell Mikoto-kun that you cried.”

“I do not mind. Although that seems wholly unrelated to what I said. Anyway, they are still fighting up above and Sayama-sama would make it here even if the Army took control of the surface. That is an absolute truth.”

“I see,” said Ooshiro. “Well, I’d like to evacuate before he gets

here, so could you carry me?”

He held a hand out to her and then spoke with a refreshing smile.

“Okay, shake. …Woof.”

#8 expressionlessly slammed her hand into his face.

# Chapter 32

## “Hitting the Ground Running”

What is right?
What is wrong?
What should we desire?

●

The colors black and white moved in the night.

The movement formed a battle on the runway in front of UCAT's disguised building.

The dark black was devouring the white as if that were the rule of the night.

The white army had formed three large groups. This was due to the attacks from the east and west contained by the asphalt walls on either side of the runway.

A black force remaining on the ground attacked the white from the west. The black force was led by a sword-wielding girl whose long black hair swayed as she fought.

The main force of black dolls and the three large dolls attacked the white from the east.

The large dolls moved out front and the normal dolls fired, defended, and attacked from the sides to wear down the white.

A girl near the forest southwest of the runway protected that black force. She had a white dog by her side and a powerful blue light escaped from between the hands held up to her chest.

She would occasionally close her eyes and speak quietly as if to confirm her power.

"I'm sorry… But please believe us."

This prevented the white army from opposing the black army too strongly and left their counterattack weak.

They did fight, but they were eventually crushed, brought down, and unable to move.

The battle filled the sky as well.

A blue and white mechanical dragon fought a blue and red mechanical dragon.

A black god of war fought a white god of war.

To prevent each other from descending to the surface, they would approach, clash, move away, and evade. But all the while, the white army grew smaller below.

At first, reinforcements had come from the lift behind the white building, but the black army had reached that area already.

No more reinforcements were coming.

However, someone in the white army was still fighting.

A woman with golden hair dancing in the wind stood on the runway's asphalt wall.

It was Sibyl.

She moved her arms in her white armored uniform and the silver god of war on the runway copied her movements.

The god of war moved toward one of the large dolls charging down the center of the runway to the east.

It wore black armor and said "#1" on the shoulder.

Sibyl sent the silver god of war directly toward large doll #1. It swiftly drew its two swords and sent out multiple attacks.

Meanwhile, #1 defended with what it held in its hands.

They were crowbars forged from long and thick metal panels and bars. It held the short nail-pulling end in a backhanded grip and used the long handle to deflect the god of war's swords to the left and right.

Sparks flew, but the tough pieces of metal completely deflected the thick swords.

"Kh."

Sibyl shrank down and glared at the large doll.

She moved her hands and raised the god of war's attack speed.

"What are you trying to accomplish!? Do you refuse to let the world have peace!?"

Surprisingly, her shout actually received a response. A calm man's voice came from the large doll's chest.

"Peace? …Listen, young lady. I don't care about that."

Amid the sounds of clashing swords, #1 moved as if prying its body forward.

"But you know what? Back during that world war, you all were so busy with the Concept War that you didn't save my family from the air strike. With your power, surely you could have saved one little city or at least a single person."

●

The sky was dyed in the colors of night.

Below the moon, a man walked along the side of a quiet road through the forest.

The elderly manager wore a dark brown leather jacket over a white work outfit.

He wore work gloves, but his fingers would twitch a bit every so often.

He also wore black sunglasses.

The inside of the sunglasses displayed video footage.

The monotone coloration showed what looked like a large road, an army of people in white armored uniforms, and a silver god of war standing to protect them.

When he moved his gloved fingers a little, the vision displayed in the sunglasses moved.

While looking at the predicted movement of the god of war and deflecting the sword strikes, the old manager spoke.

“It’s true no one would’ve believed you if you’d told them about the Concept War, but if you had that power, you could have saved so many lives during that world war.”

“Well…”

He heard the other person’s voice from the small speakers attached to the ends of the sunglasses.

“Don’t bother, young lady. I already know your answer. After all, you’re trying to put even the Concept War behind you. You’re trying to say it was wrong and leave it at that. But you know what?” he said. “There’s an idiot whose time has stopped ever since a similar war. I survived because I was protected, so I have a question for that answer of yours. If war is wrong, what does that say about me since I was given life there? And what does it say about my family that gave me life there?”

*Is there no answer to that question?* he wondered.

The people who had worked with him in that factory were not with him here. They were inside a large truck hidden in an Okutama mountain forest. Those dozen or so young men were remotely controlling the maid dolls, controlling the large-scale concept space producer and concept space communicator, and removing UCAT’s communication jamming and concept barriers.

The old manager was only controlling large doll #1 and Hajji had instructed him to move away from the others. That way he could forget everything that had happened and return to being a resident of this world.

UCAT was about three kilometers behind him. Another kilometer on this road would take him to Okutama Station.

If he threw away the sunglasses and controller gloves at the station, he could cut all ties.

"Sorry," he muttered.

The blonde woman displayed in the sunglasses frowned.

He then saw light on the road up ahead.

It was a motorcycle.

Was it a local or a street racer racing through the mountains of Okutama? The motorcycle drove down the road spotted with a red anti-skid material and with small pillars down the center line to prevent anyone from driving recklessly.

*That's some decent speed,* judged the old manager based on the sound of the engine.

It was most likely a new motorcycle. One that had only just been broken in. Instead of setting the muffler to show off by making as much noise as possible, it was made to trap and store up power inside the engine.

The old manager began controlling large doll #1 with just his left hand and pulled a small bottle from his pocket using his right hand.

He twisted open the cap with his fingers and poured the brown liquid into his mouth.

"…"

The motorcycle passed by.

By the time he turned around, the tail lights were already vanishing down a distant corner.

*…That really is fast.*

He threw the bottle behind him and raised his right hand.

A moment later, he heard the bottle shatter and focused on the opponent he could see ahead of him.

"Now, young lady. It's time you quieted down."

●

Sibyl saw large doll #1 suddenly curl up its body a little and step forward.

Instead of deflecting her attacks in defense, it was moving in to strike.

So Sibyl slammed both her swords into the curled up back.

However, the doll swayed and the swords struck its shoulder armor.

With a sound resembling spilling stone, its shoulders burst open and exposed the internal components.

*…I will attack its shoulders again before it can charge in!*

But two tremors ran through the ground before she could have the silver god of war pull back its swords.

It sounded like stone being struck. Wondering what it was, Sibyl looked down.

She saw the narrow tips of the silver god of war's feet.

"The crowbars!?"

Those tools had been slammed into the ground to pin the god of war's feet.

*…Not good!!*

She needed the proper footing to swing the swords. If the god of war's footing was unstable when it attacked, it might be able to hit, but it could not reach the enemy's core.

A moment later, large doll #1's left fist flew in a mountain-like arc.

Its target was the god of war's face.

Sibyl quickly tilted the god of war's upper body to the left.

But an instant later, the large doll's right fist slammed into the god of war's left side.

"!?"

"The left was a feint. Think about it. Your god of war is just a puppet too. The head is mostly just for show, so the real target is the source of its power in the torso. …Of course, I can't blame you for treating things with care."

The parts between the armor on the silver god of war's left side broke and the internal wires and frame were exposed.

Large doll #1 then threw its right fist again.

Sibyl reflexively had her god of war raise its arms to protect its body.

Immediately afterwards, the large doll's left fist shot up and slammed into the god of war's jaw.

"You just said you wouldn't target the head!"

"The torso is still my main target. But if I hit the jaw up like that…"

She knew what he meant. The silver god of war leaned back and up, but it could not be knocked away with its feet pinned to the

ground.

But the upwards hit left it defenseless and exposed its stomach to its opponent.

Large doll #1 prepared its attack toward the stomach. It pulled back its right arm a bit and twisted its body. Even if Sibyl tried to stop it, the fist would break through the god of war's stomach.

"…!"

Just as she cried out, a straight line of light collided with the large doll's back.

It produced a solid sound like rock breaking.

"!!"

The large doll stumbled from the impact, shifted to the left, and shook.

It turned around, but it was too late.

By that time, the wings that had fired the white blast had already landed in front of Sibyl.

Sibyl blankly spoke the name of the one who owned the white wings and white spear.

"Chisato-sama."

Disbelief filled her voice and the girl shook her head toward the sky to fix the hair after the wind had blown it around.

"Sorry I'm so late. But answer me one thing, Sibyl."

"Wh-what is it?"

Kazami smiled in the light of the moon and her own wings.

"Do you need my help?"

Sibyl thought about what she meant before giving her answer.

She shook her head and spread her arms at shoulder height as if measuring something in the air.

"I do not. I have things thiiiis much under control."

"I see." Kazami's smile grew. "But I want to help all of you. I want to give you an easier time of defeating your enemies."

The wings audibly turned their back on Sibyl.

They then lifted up in preparation to take off.

Beyond the wings of light, large doll #1 prepared to fight again and all of the black dolls in that third of the battlefield looked to Kazami.

All of the hostility poured onto her, but she did not waver. She gathered strength in her shoulder blades to support the raised

wings.

"Everyone, sorry I'm late. I won't make any excuses or any kind of formal apology. After all, this is your battlefield and my battlefield is somewhere else. But I will make sure to remember the injuries caused by my delay and help out a little here to confirm just how much I want to be with all of you and just what I can do."

"Of course," said Sibyl with a nod.

The silver god of war moved and pulled the crowbars from its feet.

Sibyl then threw them toward the opponent in front of her.

The large doll's metal hands audibly grabbed the crowbars. It quickly rotated them in its fingers to take a defensive stance.

The other large dolls faced her in similar stances on either side.

Despite the enemy's preparations, Sibyl smiled slightly.

She watched the wings in front of her tense up even more than before.

"Can you fight?"

"That's what I came here for. …But it looks like everyone is trembling. It's probably a mental concept or something, but what were they told to make them tremble like this?"

"The enemy claims to have righteousness on their side."

"Oh? How silly. Such silly nonsense using such silly reasoning. If our opponent is righteous, does that mean it's okay for us to die? My dad mass-produces righteous allies of justice and evil organizations, but hijacking busses of kindergartners and telling people to die is a job for evil. The righteous are the ones that defeat those people."

And…

"No one who was raised watching those heroes could be evil."

"But they are claiming righteousness *and* telling us to die."

"Then their righteousness must be death. In that case, they need to return to death and take their righteousness with them. And if they really are in the right, that just means we need to bring out our secret weapon as the evil organization. …We need to call in our idiot who truly claims to be a villain."

With that, Kazami waved her left hand and pulled a fist-sized black sphere from her pocket.

"Mitsuaki-san, help us out."

As soon as she spoke, everyone there heard a high-pitched sound

of destruction.

"That was the sound of a concept being destroyed!"

Sibyl shrank back at the magnitude of the sound and saw the black-haired girl by the forest growing pale.

She frantically checked on her blue philosopher's stone, but the mental concept stone was no longer glowing.

Sibyl wondered what had happened and Kazami's back answered with a bitter smile in her voice.

"A concept that forces understanding can be negated by a concept that cuts off understanding. …Nothing to worry about now, right?"

Kazami's voice and the release from the great mental pressure let everyone fighting there take a sigh of relief.

They breathed, gathered their strength, and turned expectant gazes to Kazami's back.

"Sibyl, let's fight until the villain who seeks life arrives to fight these heroes who seek death. That's the job of a fighter and the general of an evil organization. …And according to my dad, unhappy endings are kind of popular lately, so it's entirely possible we'll win. So…"

Sibyl saw the wings flap and the bearer of that light floated slowly but powerfully into the night sky.

"Until then, it's my job to use myself as a power of protection!!"

With those words, the giant dolls moved and the wings of light soared swiftly.

●

A truck and trailer were stopped on the road running through an Okutama forest.

The large pallet in the trailer had the IAI logo on the side.

To the north of the road was a cement slope and to the south was a forested slope leading down into a valley.

The white truck and trailer were completely abandoned in the night.

No one could be seen in the driver's seat or near the trailer.

However, someone quickly approached the trailer.

And they approached it from above.

Above the cement wall next to the trailer was a mountain slope

and a forest.

The approaching person forcefully jumped out from the elevated forest.

It was a boy wearing a dark blue suit.

It was Sayama.

"——————"

He flipped in midair and possessed great speed. His current trajectory would drop him into the valley beyond.

So to lower his speed, he pulled something out of the bag on his back.

It was a sheet.

Specifically, it was a sheet printed with a life-sized image of Shinjou in her underwear.

He grabbed both ends of the sheet and let it catch the air.

It could be heard fluttering in the wind as it grew round from the pressure of the air and lowered his speed.

"Toh."

A quick noise escaped his mouth as he let go of the sheet.

He flipped again, kicked off the roof of the trailer, and rolled along the ground to stop his fall.

He negated the last of his momentum by standing back up and he reached his hands overhead.

The Shinjou printed sheet fell into his raised hands.

He spread the sheet out toward the heavens as if to show it off to the moon.

"Heh heh. You stopped me there, Shinjou-kun. You were wonderfully flexible. But I will be seeing the real you soon, so let us leave it at that. I cannot wait, I cannot wait, I cannot wait. I said it thrice!"

*Yes. I counted and made no mistake, so I must be plenty calm,* he told himself as he turned around.

He looked to the abandoned truck and trailer. They were facing west which would take them to UCAT.

*…This was abandoned on the way to UCAT.*

"So did something happen that required abandoning the truck to reach UCAT immediately?"

He guessed the Army had attacked.

But if they had abandoned the truck…

*…Did they not want to get the cargo caught in the battle?*

"No. That is not it. You cannot find such cowardly thoughts in UCAT."

He smiled a bit as he spoke to himself.

He approached the trailer and recognized the shape of the pallet.

The same pallet had been on the trailer that Tsukuyomi had driven to Kanda during the summer.

This was the large pallet used to carry a god of war.

The pallet was still sealed and not opened. He had a good guess as to why.

"It cannot be sent out quite yet. Or could you call it a savior to appear when they're in a pinch?"

He received an answer from the pallet's external communicator.

"Is that you, Master Sayama?"

He recognized the voice, so he tilted his head.

"Violet-kun? Why are you holding a moon viewing out here?"

"Oh, um… Yes, sir. It seems the Army has attacked, but, uh, the automatons are evacuating because apparently a dog will get in your head."

"Hm, even if you do not mean that literally, things must be tough if people are making dog jokes."

"Yes, sir. But that danger was removed just a moment ago. #8 seems to have reconciled with the dog. I was wondering when I should head out, but I wasn't sure if I should or not."

"I do not mind. I know just how earnest you are about combat."

"Really? Then, um, I'll head out. …Please don't laugh."

Violet's voice was immediately followed by the rumble of destroyed metal.

Sayama saw the top of the cargo pallet fly high into the night sky.

It was supposed to slide open, but it had been pushed upward until it popped off.

Next, a blue and white god of war stood from the pallet.

It nervously brought its hands to its cheeks.

"O-oh, no. What did I do? And, um, where did the cover go?"

As if to answer her, the cover fell from the sky and stabbed into the ground.

The hunk of metal was fifteen meters long and five meters wide and it skewered into the ground just five centimeters to Sayama's

left.

The white metal panel made a tremendous noise, pierced through the asphalt, and shook the air.

Sayama nodded and placed a hand on the cover vibrating next to him.

“Luckily, the item in question fell right over here. Make sure not to lose it again. But what is with that body?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Violet’s god of war as it stood, crouched down, and pulled out the cover. “I’m very clumsy, so I kept destroying my spare bodies and we eventually ran out. I decided to use one of the 3rd gods of war destroyed in the summer battle until a replacement can be made.”

Violet grabbed at the armor that was colored blue and white like a maid uniform and she crouched down.

She twisted around to show off the white writing written with a brush on her back armor. It said “Miyako is Life” and “Fierce Battles are the Best”.

“Does it suit me?”

“Yes, I think it would suit no one better than you.”

“O-oh, c’mon, Master Sayama. You’re too good with words.”

To hide and put up with her embarrassment, she crouched down and beat on the asphalt with her left fist.

Sayama watched her fist as it rapidly crashed down just thirty centimeters to his right.

“I have been feeling a sort of natural sense of danger for a bit now, but it seems things have developed into a fierce battle over there. Can you help out some?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I can’t fly, but I can control gravity and inertia. …If that’s enough, I’ll help.”

“It is plenty, Violet-kun. Let us go to the people who await us.”

A soon as he said that, he felt a small force on his left leg. It was a faint tugging.

He wondered what it was.

“Baku? Did you pick up on my scent?”

Baku said nothing and quickly crawled up his leg and to his shoulder. He then circled around to the back of his neck, climbed to his head, and lay down in his hair as if to say that was his spot.

Sayama smiled bitterly at the familiar weight.

“Excellent. Let us go together to meet Shinjou-kun.”

But Baku was not the only one to arrive.

A light from the east illuminated the two people and the animal. The thick light was accompanied by the sound of an engine and a horn.

“Hey, outta the way! This rental’s hard to control, so how about moving!?”

Sayama turned a bitter smile toward the driver of the approaching motorcycle.

He gave an exasperated shrug.

“Are you stupid? Cutting past me or blocking my way is disrespectful.”

Sayama spoke with his hands in his suit pockets and the motorcycle headlight shining directly on him.

“Isn’t that right, Stupid Izumo.”

# Chapter 33

## “Released Gathering”

Break through the wall
Brush off the obstacles
Do not allow the gouging power to face you

●

Loud footsteps and the blowing wind filled a white corridor.

The writing on the wall said BF2. The person producing the rushing footsteps wore black and dragged the color red behind him.

His weapons were a steel spear in his right hand and the destructive power of motionlessness in the gaze of his left eye.

Everyone who got in the way of his swift pace was either knocked to the ground or broken and blown away.

His left arm did not move thanks to the large split in his left shoulder.

But there was no blood flowing from the wound. Before any blood could flow, it was blown into the air by his actions.

Someone following behind him called out his name.

“General Hajji!”

Hajji ran.

He knew they were following and he knew this was all according to plan.

Most of them would return to the surface and only he and a few others would reach the sixth basement.

They knew the layout thanks to the information Shino had gained that summer.

They would take the corridor to the sixth basement on the way there, but they would use the fifth basement on the way back. They would break through the shaft on the eastern end of both floors, use the Concept Cores to bring the fifth basement’s lift up to the surface, and have Alex take them away.

The Concept Cores from 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 9th were kept below UCAT. If they stole those, the Leviathan Road could not be completed and controversy would break out over the unfairness of some Gears having their Concept Cores stolen and some not.

And to do that…

*…We have to reach the back of the sixth basement.*

That would mean their victory. After all, Hajji’s vision could stop and destroy all things.

*…If I take the Concept Core pallets hostage, no one can touch me.*

*But,* he thought while looking up. There was something he had to

do before continuing down.

"I must reveal UCAT's crimes."

That was the true reason for this fight. He had to inform every UCAT and every reservation of what Japanese UCAT had hidden ten years ago.

There was a place for him to do that.

He saw a large pair of explosion-resistant doors in front of him. They had the words "Japanese UCAT New Headquarters" written on them.

No soldiers guarded them and there was no interception system. The doors only brought their thickness and sturdiness to the table.

Hajji gathered strength in his left eye and prepared to send a powerful gaze toward the door, but…

"!"

He suddenly moved to the right.

The blood scattering from his left shoulder revealed something that had not been there before.

This new form suddenly appeared to his left beyond the spray of blood.

"Oh, damn. How am I supposed to tell Natsu-san I got blood on my lab coat?"

The man wore glasses and he sounded troubled. Hajji turned toward him and smiled.

"2nd-Gear representative Kashima Akio? Are you the line of defense here? You are, aren't you? Hm?"

●

Kashima was mentally sweating as he confronted Hajji with his back to the explosion-resistant door.

*…If only Atsuta was here.*

Atsuta had gone to the surface with a prototype Cowling Sword.

Tsukuyomi had been the one to place Kashima here. She had guessed the enemy would not come to the new headquarters because they were after the Concept Cores down below.

She had not wanted to put anyone with a family on the front lines.

"That sure backfired. …I never thought the final boss himself would show up."

"Are you happy? You are, aren't you? Hm?"

Kashima did not nod. The enemy was injured and his weapon would be powerful if it was a concept weapon.

He was worried about the gaze weapon in his left eye, but Kashima had a technique to make his way behind the man.

*…I can use the Art of Walking.*

Hajji had seen through the Art of Walking just now due to the sharpness of his instincts.

Kashima had tried to make him careless by making the area look deserted, but he had realized it was odd for the place to be deserted.

This time, there would be no tricks. Neither one would be careless and they would both be sharply focused, but that was why the Art of Walking would work here.

They were five meters apart. Both of them could cover that distance in an instant.

And it was easy for Kashima to read Hajji when he was bleeding and breathing heavily.

He knew the Art of Walking would work.

Even if the man shifted or adjusted himself, Kashima could instantly re-activate the Art of Walking.

So with no signal, he began the technique that would settle this.

"——————"

He used it as he began to walk. The key to the Art of Walking was Hajji's right eye. He used that as the opening to shift away from Hajji's senses and he circled toward Hajji's unusable left shoulder.

He moved quickly as he circled around the man.

If he reached out his hand and simply touched the man with his palm, Hajji would be blown away because he was not a god.

Kashima saw Hajji facing straight forward and away from him.

Kashima knew he could defeat the man, so he stepped forward and raised his right hand to attack.

Suddenly, Hajji moved his own right hand as if to hold Kashima in check.

"!?"

He assumed this was an attack with the spear, but it was not. Hajji pulled something from his sleeve and dropped it to the floor.

The small black object fell clumsily down and solidly bounced.

*…A stopwatch?*

Just as Kashima wrinkled his brow beyond his glasses, Hajji opened his mouth while looking in the wrong direction.

“Kashima, I do not know where you are, but you can see what I just threw, can’t you?”

He could, but…

“That is my sympathy. Yes. And Kashima, let me ask you one thing. …How is your family doing?”

*Why is he asking that?* wondered Kashima with a frown.

Hajji continued with a deep smile.

“Kashima Natsu and Kashima Harumi. Your wife did not have work today and it’s probably about time your daughter is being put to bed. Yes. A wonderful thing. A truly wonderful thing. Yes. And with that said…did you call home before this battle?”

He did not answer. Answering would disturb his movements and possibly break the Art of Walking himself.

But Hajji continued.

“I sent them a small package. Yes. It is labelled as a prize. …Your wife will likely wait to open it until you return home. And yet if she did open it, she would find out what is inside. Yes.”

And…

“You know what that stopwatch means, don’t you? …Three more seconds now.”

Hearing the number of seconds started up Kashima’s emotions.

He clenched his teeth as he tried to choose between victory and his family.

“Kashima. …You are a wonderful military god. Yes. After all, you hesitated.”

Hajji looked right at him. His hesitation had likely created a seam in his Art of Walking.

“That hesitation means you might have chosen to abandon your family. Wonderful. Truly wonderful. Yes. …I am sure your family will hate you as they are blown to pieces.”

“You…!!”

Kashima swung his right arm, but Hajji’s face had already moved right up to him.

“Kashima, let me tell you something interesting. Yes, I’m sure you will find it very interesting indeed.”

Kashima realized the spear tip was digging into his left side.

“Now, here is that interesting thing: everything I said there was a lie. Of course it was. I would never do anything so cruel. So…So rest easy. Rest easy and be defeated.”

A moment later, intense pain slammed into his stomach like an impact.

“————!!”

He was knocked back and pinned to the wall behind him. At the same time, he heard Hajji’s voice spoken through a bitter smile with teeth bared.

“I’m quite jealous. After all, your family is alive and well.”

●

Kazami flew high in the sky.

Below her, she saw a few giants, a crowd of dolls, and persistent people.

Her target was one of those giants, large doll #1.

It spoke and seemed to have different motivations from the Army.

Deciding it would be her enemy after her late arrival, Kazami looked to the moon and performed a gentle vertical half-rotation.

She knew the others were sure to defeat the Army. No matter what doubts they might have, they would accomplish that.

“Even if they tremble, fear, hesitate, or show any other weakness.”

None of that would get in the way of the power they held.

She flipped upside down in midair and stared at the large doll one hundred meters below.

“Are you ready!?”

With that question, she flapped her wings downward.

In an instant, the power of the wings of light seemed to launch her more than they made her fly.

She continued on.

She broke through the wind and fired G-Sp2.

But large doll #1 deflected it. It knocked the light away using the corner of the crowbar it held. The metal surface of the corner was torn away, but it did not break.

*…How did it react to that!? Does it have some kind of reflex assistance system!?*

The enemy roared in response.

“We made our weapons based on your data! Your attacks aren’t going to work that easily on us!”

She continued to descend and the large doll swung a fist up as a counterattack.

She was on a collision course. If she dodged too far out, it could correct its aim. If she dodged too close in, she would be unable to eliminate her momentum and crash into the doll.

A hit was the only option now, but Kazami found a solution.

“G-Sp2! Let’s win this!!”

She accelerated. She flapped her wings and quickly closed in on the fist.

“G-Sp2!! Third form!!”

G-Sp2 transformed during her ultra-high speed descent.

“I’ll blow it away,” displayed the weapon.

A moment later, she poured on even more acceleration.

She targeted the metal fist swinging up toward her.

Hitting it would lead to a single result.

“You’re going to hit!?” said the man’s voice. “You won’t escape that unharmed!!”

“That’s not my intention!!”

She locked the accelerator on full and shrunk down her body.

She held the spear tip out front and charged on in a straight line.

●

A back wearing a work uniform and a leather jacket trembled in the waiting room of Okutama Station.

The old man leaned back in a wooden bench and looked up toward the ceiling, but he was actually looking at the inside of his sunglasses.

“You idiot.”

The inside of his sunglasses showed him wings of light flying down with the moon behind them.

But the sunglasses also showed several red and green lines indicating the enemy’s predicted attacks.

It calculated out the enemy’s target, path, and destructive force.

The winged girl would destroy the large doll’s right arm, but the impact would crush her.

*…I’m getting the far better end of this deal.*

The old manager thought this was the most worthless kind of death in war.

She was destroying herself without even defeating her opponent.

*…And this won't help my mood either. Is this the kind of fight you want, UCAT?*

*But one thing's certain,* he thought. *Her death won't remain.*

If the Army won, this battle would be seen as an evil thing and those who died would be denied by history.

"Just like my family."

*So I guess this is fine,* he thought while moving his fingers to accelerate the large doll's rising fist.

*This will make her the same as my family. She won't be able to save anyone, but she'll be denied and forgotten.*

"I shouldn't have thrown out the alcohol," he spat out while preparing to close his eyes at the instant of impact.

But then static ran through the sunglasses.

"!?"

That meant something unpredicted had occurred and the predictive displays had gone haywire.

The enemy had done something.

*…But what!?*

He then saw the wings of light throw her body out from the falling spear.

"————!?"

The spear-user was planning to send only the spear into the fist.

*You idiot,* he thought. *If you don't throw away your life, the attack won't be heavy enough.*

The predictive readings returned to the sunglasses. Without the weight of her riding the spear, the attack would lose its stability and weight. The calculations said the piercing blow would stop halfway through the fist and not even destroy the arm.

But the old manager saw the wings of light flap in the sky.

*…Are you running!?*

No.

She used all of her previous momentum to fly even further down.

She flew to the surface below the large doll before the spear hit.

In her fall, she twisted around to face the heavens, spread a hand, and shouted.

“G-Sp2! Come, my power!”

●

Kazami cried out.

She flapped her wings, transformed her fall into a power dive, and shot past the rising metal fist.

As she fell and accelerated, she twisted around and raised her right hand toward the heavens.

She spread the hand like she was trying to seize the moon, gathered her strength, and opened her mouth toward heaven.

“Come!!”

G-Sp2 reacted to her word.

It suddenly trembled in its accelerated fall and the light on the back end grew to raise its acceleration.

This weapon contained a dragon and it moved straight toward Kazami’s open hand.

It would pierce through everything in the way. In this case, that was large doll #1.

The metal doll was over ten meters tall, but it was penetrated from top to bottom in an instant.

It was a single strike.

“————!!”

Countless metallic sounds occurred so quickly that they blended together.

G-Sp2 broke through the raised metal fist and out the bottom of the stomach.

Kazami had just landed below the open hole.

She raised a hand as she stood and G-Sp2 flew into it while surrounded by shimmering heat.

“You called?” it asked.

Kazami smiled and nodded. She spun the weapon in her fingers and stood it on the ground.

The sound of the back tapping on the asphalt was accompanied by the exploding shockwave produced inside the giant body overhead.

A great roar filled large doll #1 and metal could be heard tearing apart.

Next, the giant metal doll split into two halves.

Its anguished cry was the creaking of its motors before it lost

power and began to tilt to either side.

After the tilt grew too far, it began to utterly collapse.

Below, Kazami looked up and ignored the downpour of scattering parts.

The metal rain let up and the moon was revealed in the clear sky.

A voice came from the collapsing metal giant.

“Wait. What were you going to do if that didn’t work?”

“What does it matter when it did work? This is what it means to do my best.”

“But my family protected me!”

*Oh,* thought Kazami. *This person must be a lot like me.*

So she answered while looking up at the sky.

“They cared about you. …Do you really need a reason for or proof of that?”

“…”

“If so, then go look in a mirror. No matter how much the current age denies it and no matter who denies it, you’ll find some evidence reflected there so long as you don’t get rid of yourself.”

She lifted G-Sp2 high.

The metal legs falling to either side were blown away by the strike and scattered in the wind.

That was all, so she sighed.

“Okay.”

*What to do next?* she wondered.

But a sudden shadow appeared overhead.

*…Eh?*

She jumped left on reflex.

An instant later, a giant black metal object crashed in the spot she had left. It had been sent there from the east.

“Susamikado!?”

●

Kazami trembled at her own voice. She only knew one thing that could take down UCAT’s strongest god of war.

“Typhon!?”

She saw a white form approaching from low in the eastern sky.

It was fast.

“Wow,” she said when she realized the sound did not precede its

arrival. “This isn’t good. It’s supersonic!”

She tried to call out and warn everyone of the impending shockwave, but it was too late.

The white giant was moving faster than sound and it was already almost within arm’s reach of them.

The large-scale shockwave easily tore up the surface of the ground, so if that happened to the people behind Kazami…

“————!!”

She reflexively thrust G-Sp2 into the air.

She used all her strength in the hope of splitting the shockwave as much as she could.

“Oh!!”

She slammed it forward, but her wish was not granted.

The white god of war suddenly changed course. It moved to the southern forest on Kazami’s right.

Immediately afterwards, it rotated around and flew up into the southern sky.

It ascended.

“Eh?”

Why had it not taken advantage of that perfect opportunity?

She quickly found the reason.

Something was racing along the runway from the east.

It was a motorcycle and a god of war.

The motorcycle’s driver had swung a sword. This had created a blast of light that struck the white god of war from behind and knocked it to the south.

Meanwhile, Kazami saw something unbelievable coming her way.

A boy stood on the back seat of the motorcycle and he held a giant god of war overhead.

The god of war’s armor was painted to resemble a maid uniform.

The god of war lay horizontally with its arms spread to the sides as if flying. Kazami frowned and called the name of the boy supporting the god of war’s stomach from below.

“Sayama!? What is that idiot doing!?”

Her gaze then moved to the boy driving the motorcycle.

When she saw him raising a large white sword that had somewhat changed form, her expression crumbled a bit.

“There he is showing up at the perfect time. He really is a boy.”

●

Sayama felt the wind.

Ahead of the strip of asphalt were a group of black dolls, two large dolls fighting Sibyl's white god of war, Susamikado collapsed next to them, and Kazami.

Beyond them were a white army struggling to regain its footing and a black army working to defeat them.

Sayama felt Izumo turn the motorcycle toward Kazami.

Baku emulated him as he looked up at Violet who he held with both arms.

"Violet-kun, are you about ready? It is time."

"Yes, sir. Motorcycles sure are fast. …And are you sure I'm not too heavy?"

"With your control of inertia and gravity, you are perfectly light."

"R-really? Oh, but was it indecent to ask that?"

"Don't worry, god of war girl. Judging by my attempted wife, being a little indecent is just right."

"Ha ha ha. So does 'indecent' mean 'uncivilized' in the Izumo dialect? You learn something useless every day."

Sayama raised Violet in a throwing stance.

"Now, Violet-kun, it really is time. But here is one piece of advice. When flying like this, you clench your fists and hold them out in front of you."

"Y-yes, sir!!"

The god of war did as instructed and Sayama threw her forward.

A powerful wind surrounded her as she flew.

The black dolls turned toward the noise and frantically prepared their shields, but it was too late.

She slammed head-first into the dolls and began sliding on her stomach once she landed on the asphalt. She had already cut off her inertia, but her speed remained and she knocked everything out of the way as a giant mass of metal.

But…

"Ah, n-no! I can't stop!!"

The white army and Kazami had initially looked up, thinking reinforcements had arrived, but once they realized the reinforcements had no way of stopping, they reacted the same as

the black army.

“Waaaah!!”

They ran about one hundred meters back at full speed.

Violet tore up the asphalt but finally came to a stop after sliding those hundred meters with them.

“Ow, ow, ow,” she said as she got up and brushed off her armor. “S-sorry about that. All I ever do is mess up.”

Everyone glared at her and a path had been created behind her. The central line of black dolls was gone and the black army had frantically moved back, so a wide path had opened up.

The motorcycle drove down it with Sayama standing on the back seat with his arms crossed. It circled in front of Violet and came to a stop.

Sayama glanced over at Kazami who was still glaring and then he kicked Izumo’s back in front of him.

Without turning back, Izumo lightly waved his right hand up and down to say he understood.

“Well, there’s a lot to say.”

Sitting on the motorcycle, Izumo looked to Kazami who stood to his left.

She hesitated and did not immediately return his look.

"…"

Finally, she met his gaze.

Her eyebrows lowered and twisted, she bit her lip, and she clearly did not know what to say.

"Wh-what's that look for? …Is something funny, Kaku?"

"Well," he said while crossing his arms and giving a deep nod. "I was just thinking I could expect some fresh kissing and a lot of other things from you every day."

Kazami grew pale and Sayama tilted his head from behind Izumo.

"What do you mean, Izumo?"

"Ha ha ha. That's simple. Chisato's going to be working to make sure I don't get tired of her."

"W-wait a second, Kaku. When did you wake up?"

"Around when you started with 'it seems I…' "

"I see."

Kazami sighed, approached Sayama, and gestured for him to leave.

He hopped down from the motorcycle and Izumo scooted forward so Kazami could sit there.

And then…

"If you'd woken up, then get up!!"

A kick not even Sayama could see sent Izumo flying from the motorcycle.

He slammed into the asphalt more than he rolled along it and he frantically got back up.

"Y-you idiot! I was seriously injured not long ago!!"

"Not anymore, you're not. Your arm was remade good as new and you're alive and well."

After those words, the motorcycle crashed into him. She climbed up on top of the motorcycle that had fallen on top of him, hopped up and down, and spoke to the cries of agony coming from underneath.

"I was… I was so desperately worried. I was even crying. So *why* in the world would you think it's okay to joke about that!? I'm…I'm ready to…"

She started to cry, connected the clutch, and spilled tears with

the accelerator on full throttle.

"Wahhhhhhh!"

"Are you crying or wearing me down with the tire!?"

"Ha ha ha. This is indeed the kind of flirting you will never grow tired of," said Sayama. "And to think it is going to escalate further each and every day."

Suddenly, they heard a certain sound in every direction.

A wave of metallic sounds reached them as people raised their guns and blades.

This audible intent to kill caused the white group to face their surroundings.

The three sections of the white army saw the color black surrounding them.

In that black, a girl with long hair stepped forward from the west. Her eyes met Sayama's when he turned around.

"Well? What are you going to do? This is still a hopeless situation for you."

Susamikado was finally beginning to get up, but Typhon was waiting in the sky and two large dolls remained unharmed on the surface.

The large dolls rotated the crowbars they held in their hands and held them up like scythes.

When those were swung down, it would remove at least a few people from their ranks.

But without watching them all tense up, Mikoku gave a shout.

"This ends here!!"

Those words were followed by a metallic sound.

However, it did not come from the crowbars. Before those metal scythes could reach them, a long pillar of light shot from the ground and into the giant dolls' backs.

Mikoku and the black army gasped as Izumo pushed the motorcycle out of the way and stood up.

He held V-Sw over his shoulder as it contained the light and he smiled toward Kazami who had moved to the side.

"Fine, it's my turn now. And Chisato, you go take that speech-loving idiot into the building."

"M-me!?"

She looked surprised, so he reached his left hand out to her.

He spread his fingers, dropped the hand on her head, and rubbed it as if messing with her hair.

“Get going.”

She drew back her head from his hand but finally responded.

“You don’t leave me much choice.”

She peeled off his hand and turned toward the wall of black with G-Sp2 in hand.

“Sayama, let’s go. We’re pursuing Hajji. And it’s your job to stop him.”

“Oh? Why must the handsome negotiator trouble himself with that filthy physical labor?”

“Shinjou’s on the bottom level.”

“We must get there immediately! I cannot contain myself a moment longer!!”

Kazami sighed, turned her back on him, and faced the black army.

“Sayama, there was a lot I wanted to say to you.”

She squeezed her spear and raised her wings.

“But I really don’t even care anymore.”

She left those words in the air as she shot forward and smashed the wall of black.

●

Mikoku ran.

She had many comrades, she had the black dolls, and the wall blocking the enemy’s way was thick.

She was currently running through that wall.

She was moving beyond it and toward the white building’s entrance.

The girl named Kazami had just attacked to create a path for her and Sayama to reach the building.

Her comrades were of course trying to stop them. She could hear their footsteps, see them preparing their weapons, and see the wall growing denser.

But some people could neutralize a wall like that.

Hajji could, Jord could, and Tatsumi could.

“As can Concept Core wielders like her!!”

She ran onward while wondering if she fell under that category as well.

She just had to pass a few more people to reach the other side. If she ran diagonally to the entrance, she could pursue them as they approached the building.

She was certain this would work.

The enemy had to push through a greater number of people than she did.

If she caught up with them and started a fight, she would win. No matter what kind of attack they used on her, her regeneration ability would allow her to win. Once they attacked her and thought they had won, she could get in a fatal attack of her own.

*…And that will remove Hajji's enemies!!*

Her strategy would work. The Army would correct the world and the last remnants of the Concept War would vanish.

*…And I will part ways with Shino.*

She shook off that sudden dark thought and gathered strength in her legs to run even faster.

But that was when she heard something to the right.

It was a strange sound.

She heard it along with flesh being struck, bones breaking, cries of pain, cries of surprise, the blowing wind, and loud footsteps.

It was the sound of a broken barrier.

"Did they already make it through!?"

Instead of thinking that was too fast, she was simply filled with disbelief.

But she saw the movement that proved it had happened.

Something flew through the air beyond the crowd to her right.

They were men wearing black armored uniforms. Some had been blasted into the sky by an uppercut or smash and others had dodged, but it was clear they had allowed something to get through down below.

And then more people sprayed outward.

On the edge of the human wall and in the position closest to the white building, a dozen or more people in black armored uniforms were blown away.

They flew into the air with their limbs sprawled out as two people ran through on the ground.

One was a girl with white wings raised and the other was a boy in a dark blue suit.

For some reason, Mikoku was seeing them from behind.

*…Strange. Why am I seeing their backs!? I should be ahead of them!*

That meant they had breached the human wall faster than she had.

How had they been faster than her when she had an absolute advantage?

The answer was clear.

*…They truly were not thinking about anything more than breaking through.*

“Kh!”

Mikoku ran while reminding herself Hajji had left this battlefield to her.

If the enemy made it through and pursued Hajji, it would be her responsibility.

They were around a dozen meters apart and she worked to fill that gap.

“…!!”

She could not speak, so she inhaled, filled her lungs, and raced across the asphalt.

But suddenly…

“Mikoku!!”

She heard a voice from overhead and wind reached her.

She looked up to see Typhon. The six white wings were moving to crush the smaller wings and the boy on the surface.

*…Is she going to stop them!?*

Just as Mikoku hoped it was true, more wings flew in from behind.

These were four black wings and they crashed into Typhon.

“Mikage-san and I are your opponents!!”

The black god of war used all of its thrust to collide with the white one and send them both into the white building’s second floor. The building materials exploded and the white and black gods of war disappeared beyond the building.

That left Mikoku and her two enemies.

“They’re pulling away!?”

*Why?* she wondered with clenched teeth.

But she remembered that those two had not turned around when Typhon had arrived overhead.

It was like they had known Susamikado would intervene.

*Why?* she asked again. *Why can't I catch up to them?*

"Ohhh!"

Her feet raced along to throw her body forward.

"!?"

But those feet suddenly slammed into the ground and came to a rapid stop.

She trembled, tensed her shoulders, and forced open her clenched teeth to shout.

"Who is getting in my way!?"

A white sword was stabbed into the asphalt ahead of her. It was buried down to the hilt.

Someone had thrown it to stop her pursuit.

The orientation of the hilt allowed her to predict the direction from which it had been thrown.

She turned toward the south side of the white building.

She remembered there being a path leading around back there and that some of their men had gone that way to take the lift leading down.

But those men were nowhere to be seen. Instead, she heard a voice.

The voice was singing a strange song.

It was a rap beginning with an "oh".

"Oh, really? Really? Re-re-re-re-really? China's capital ain't Hong Kong, it's – oh, yeah! – Be-Be-Be-Be-Beijing!"

She heard someone hitting nearby metal objects like a drunk.

"Be-Be-Be-Be-Beng-ji-ji-jing-jing-jing – ohhhhh, yeah! Menchegeda!!"

With that south, someone twisting and dancing jumped out from behind the building.

The young man wore a white combat coat and held a microphone wrapped in ribbons.

He nimbly performed two cartwheels and a moonsault and he raised his hands as he landed.

His song and actions brought everyone to a stop.

All focus was on him and he opened his mouth at the center of it all.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you all so very – apyaaahh!!"

He threw three splendid kisses with both hands, took a satisfied breath, and gave everyone a smile.

“Now, time to get chopping.”

“Who the hell are you!?”

The entire black army yelled at him and the entire white army held their heads in their hands.

In front of those two opposite actions, the young man brushed up his short hair.

“What, do you idiots not know the artist who brought all of America to tears? Okay, morons. I’ll say it in plain Japanese, so listen up. I’ll start with something simple. I may have already shaken America, but you know what’s going to happen when I make my debut?”

He raised his right hand and pushed on the empty air with each word.

“All! Of! America! Will! Bow! Down! To! Me! And naked at that!! What do you have to say about that!? In other words, my name is…”

However, he was not the one to finish his sentence.

That was done by Shino who held her blue philosopher’s stone southwest of the runway.

Her eyes opened wide when she saw him and she gave him a simple name.

“The rapist!!”

With that shout, the battle resumed.

# Chapter 34

## “False World”

But
No matter what anyone says
This remains absolutely certain

●

The corridor was long and narrow.

It was about fifty meters long and pure white except for the BF6 written on the wall. One end led to a rising staircase and the other to two large metal doors with a smaller rising staircase to the side.

That straight space had become a straight battlefield.

The battlefield was supported by a single individual and countless individuals.

The single individual was a girl.

The black-haired girl wore a white and black armored uniform and she kneeled down by the two doors.

The white cannon resting on her shoulder aimed at the other end of the corridor and she fired countless bullets of light.

Several spare barrels hung from her waist and her eyes stared straight down the corridor from below her sweaty brow.

The sound of her firing resembled a spray of water.

She was firing on the countless individuals who decorated the other end of the battlefield.

They all wore black armored uniforms. Some were men, some were women, some were young, and some were old.

They relied on their thick armor and fired back, but a single shot from the white side was enough to blow them away.

“Dammit!!” shouted one of them while crouched down. “We need to make a path for General Hajji, so why can’t we gain any ground!?”

At the same time, they were all struck by white glowing bullets spread out across the corridor.

The solid sound of bodies being struck rang out again and again.

The ones still waiting back in the stairway were tackled by their comrades who were knocked backwards and they were left unable to move while holding those comrades.

The girl sighed and began swapping out the smoking barrel.

She spoke quietly to herself with a serious expression.

“Don’t worry. He’ll definitely be here!”

A voice answered her.

“Who do you think is coming, Shinjou? Who can make it through this veritable sea of enemies?”

The voice was accompanied by two sets of footsteps walking down the small staircase to the side.

Shinjou did not turn around and twisted the scorching barrel while feeling its heat through her glove.

“Sayama-kun will be here, Itaru-san. I know he will. It’s so obvious that we didn’t even have to make a promise.”

“Oh? That’s quite the blind trust you have there. The bell of madness is ringing in your head, isn’t it?”

She answered his sneer with a snort of laughter, but then…

“Itaru-sama. There is blood.”

*…Blood?*

Assuming he had been hit by a stray bullet, Shinjou turned to look at him.

And she really did see it there on the handkerchief Sf had held to his mouth.

“Itaru-san, you…”

She had heard rumors of him coughing up blood, but this was her first time to actually see it.

He must have noticed her look because he clacked his metal cane against the floor.

“Interesting, isn’t it? I’ve lost so much color, but the blood I cough up is still nearly red.”

“Th-that is not interesting! You need to get back to the fifth basement!”

Meanwhile, footsteps rang down the corridor.

Shinjou quickly finished replacing Ex-St’s barrel

Just as she tightened it to cock it, several people appeared crawling along the corridor.

She fired regardless.

Ex-St’s bullets could react to her will and track her targets. If her will remained strong, she could hit them even when they hid behind cover.

The sound of her firing shook the corridor and smoke raced back and forth.

Even while hiding behind her large weapon, some bullets grazed her armor and body.

The blue defense philosopher’s stone pendant from the development department was constantly shining brightly.

But she had no reason to stop firing.

As she kept shooting beyond the smoke, she let out a shout.

“Look! This isn’t interesting or anything, so hurry back, Itaru-san! It’s dangerous here!”

“No, this should be very interesting. After all, I’ll get to see regret fill your face before long.”

“Eh?”

She frowned as her gaze raced along beyond the smoke.

She saw the enemy past the smoke, but she saw nothing she would regret.

“Wh-what do you mean? What will I regret?”

“I’m obviously not going to tell you. And there is one other interesting thing. This one you should find interesting too,” he said. “After all, your mother suffered from the same illness I do.”

She felt her hair stand on end at his words.

But new people in black armor descended the stairs, so she focused on firing.

However, Itaru’s comment had shaken her enough to affect her aim a little.

She heard him laughing, then coughing, and finally spitting something out.

“Aim straight, Shinjou. Aim straight for your regret. And I’ll tell you something else you’ll find interesting. …Do you know what this doors behind us leads to?”

“T-to the storage area for the Concept Cores UCAT has.”

Shinjou answered while trying to get her bullets to start hitting again.

But she sensed motion next to her. It was Itaru shaking his head.

“That’s one of the doors. Do you want to know where the other leads?”

“The other?”

The word “foreboding” appeared in Shinjou’s heart.

So she closed her eyes and raised her voice as she fired. It was a tone of rejection.

“I don’t want to know!!”

“Then I’ll tell you.”

Her eyes opened wide and Itaru’s voice filled her surroundings.

“The other door next to me leads to the true sixth basement that

we sealed ten years ago. It only reached the prototype stage and was never completed, but it was a concept creation facility."

Shinjou quietly repeated that term as she fired. Her lips slowly moved to form the words "concept creation facility", but she immediately shook her head.

"Th-that's impossible!! You can't create concepts!"

"But two such facilities were created. One in the past and one just over a decade ago. The organization that formed the basis of the Army had likely completed one…by modeling it after Babel."

He paused.

"Listen. Babel is a storage space for the negative concepts, but it was originally a tower meant to control the creation and erasure of concepts. It is a concept laboratory…a place to work toward becoming a god."

"Th-then why was UCAT trying to do that? …To oppose the Army? Because the Army was trying to create concepts, UCAT also-…"

"No," answered Itaru with some slight irritation at her continued questions. "Listen. That is not what UCAT was trying to oppose. And the reason UCAT's concept creation research was never completed lies elsewhere."

That is…

"It was because the person who formulated the concept creation theory left UCAT. That person's name was Shinjou Yukio."

"…!? M-my mom!?"

She turned around and shouted on reflex as if to say it was not true.

"I'd heard my mom was part of UCAT! If she left, then where did she go!?"

Itaru was not the one to answer her shouted question.

The answer came from the wall.

A console box was located by the metal door on the left wall. It was the communication terminal that also controlled the door.

Its monitor displayed a certain Arab face.

"Hajji. …It's been ten years since last I saw you."

Itaru muttered to himself as Hajji smiled on the staticky monitor.

Only one side of his mouth rose and revealed his teeth.

"Now, then."

Hajji took one step back in the monitor and spread his right arm.

He was inside Japanese UCAT's headquarters on the second basement.

In the center of that room, he lowered his right arm and gave a smiling shout.

"The communications system has already been opened and this footage is being sent to all the world's UCATs and each Gear's reservation. I am Hajji, leader of the Army and former general of 9th-Gear. I have something to discuss with you all."

He took a breath.

"Let us check over our answers about this world."

●

Many people had evacuated to the large storage space on UCAT's fifth basement and they were all looking and listening to the terminal on the wall.

Among them, Ooki tilted her head at the words coming from the communication terminal monitor and speakers.

"Check over our answers? Is he saying we have something wrong about this world?"

"This may be unnecessary, but let me introduce the usual theory concerning the creation of this world."

Hajji snapped the fingers of his right hand.

An instant later the screen changed to show a large white circle in a black space.

"This is about the creation of the eleven Gears, isn't it?" said Ooki.

The white circle burst, the circles indicating the ten positive Gears radiated outward, and a large red circle appeared.

Everyone tilted their heads at the completed diagram of the eleven Gears and Ooki tilted hers even further and frowned.

"If he's saying we have to check over our answers…he must mean there's something wrong with this," she muttered. "Hm? But how is it wrong?"

●

In UCAT's headquarters, Hajji had displayed several moving circles on the two-story monitor. He then pulled a recording ROM from his pocket.

He held the ROM down to a dog.

The dog took the ROM in its mouth, wagged its tail, and entered a nearby terminal.

After watching the tail vanish inside the machine, Hajji turned to face the terminal with the camera.

“Can you tell someone has altered the data on the creation of this world? Hm?”

He waited a few seconds after that tone of question.

After a few breaths and time to blink, he let out one last deep breath and looked up.

He smiled into the camera.

“Let me tell you just how it has been altered. It was changed to say the world was made up of only eleven Gears.”

He paused for a breath.

“But what if there was another Gear? A twelfth Gear?”

●

“Impossible!!”

That shout came from the underground space of Izumo UCAT. The voice belonged to Gyes who was preparing to head out within the underground hangar for 3rd residents.

She tore her eyes from the terminal on the wall and looked left and right, but Moira 1st, 2nd, and 3rd were all frowning. Moira 1st shook her head a bit.

“I have never heard anything about that.”

However, a voice next to the wall answered 1st. It came from Miyako who held a chewing gum cigarette in her mouth.

“Then we’ll need to hear his explanation of this.”

As if responding to her icy tone, the terminal filled with black.

Just like before, a large white circle appeared in the center of the black.

Moira 3rd responded when she saw it.

“How is that any different? That splits into the ten Gears, right?”

Sure enough, the white circle split apart and ten small circles radiated outwards.

But one thing was different from before.

“The fragments of the broken circle…”

When the ten Gears split off, fragments scattered throughout the

black.

While the ten circles left, the fragments were pulled together into a large pile of wreckage near the center.

It looked like they were forming another circle.

●

The battle continued beneath the night sky.

As white and black clashed, the black army cried out.

“Look at the truth!! Look at what you forgot ten years ago!!”

While under attack, the white army saw large doll #2 suddenly spread its arms.

Lightning-like light raced between its hands.

“…!”

An image was displayed in the air in front of the large doll’s chest.

The midair projection showed the creation of the world that Hajji described.

As the ten Gears scattered, a blue circle appeared in the empty center space and grew larger.

“Think about it,” said Hajji’s voice. “Would such a massive concept really break apart so cleanly when it burst? And why would the negative Gears be in the center of the world? Just watch.”

The blue circle formed at the center of the ten Gears. That circle represented a Gear large enough to counterbalance the other ten.

“The chaos that gave birth to the world shattered, but the fragments gathered and formed a single Gear once more. This Gear was the remains of the mother Gear and it regained the pieces torn away by the other Gears via evolution and replication.”

Hajji turned to the monitor.

“In other words, this Gear inherited everything about that original Gear and possessed concepts equivalent to the positive concepts of the other Gears. It became the ultimate Gear and it belonged in the center of all the other Gears. …You could call it Top-Gear.”

With those words, a plus-sign appeared in the large blue circle.

“Top-Gear…”

The white army was left speechless in the face of that term, but soon…

“Lies!” someone shouted.

“Yeah!” agreed someone else. “My father is from 2nd, but I’ve never heard anything about a Top-Gear! And what about this Gear!? How do you explain its existence!?”

“Don’t you find it odd?” asked Hajji as if as an answer.

He held his right hand toward the large screen behind him where the white circles of the ten Gears circled the blue circle.

“Pulled by the massive amount of concepts held by Top-Gear, the ten Gears revolved around it. But that would not cause the Gears to collide with each other. So why do you think those collisions occurred?”

●

On a road through an Okutama forest, a control and communications terminal on the side of an abandoned god of war cargo trailer sent its words and images into the deserted space around it.

The screen showed ten red circles appear next to the Top-Gear circle. These ten circles were negative concepts.

“Do you understand now? These ten negatives gathered to form a single Gear.”

Hajji’s voice filled the empty air.

“When the positive Gears settled to create Top-Gear, a massive negative Gear was created to act as the opposite of the positive concepts. In other words, it was a negative copy of Top-Gear. It was the lowest Gear made as a reverse copy of Top-Gear which created all else. …That was Low-Gear.”

TOP
LOW
TOP
LOW

The images on the monitor began to move.

The ten Gears were drawn to the negative Low-Gear and their orbits grew unstable.

Low-Gear's red circle began a quick and tight revolution around Top-Gear's circle and the ten Gears rapidly approached Low-Gear before moving away again.

The ten Gears would occasionally graze Top-Gear too, but it was far less common than their intersections with Low-Gear.

"Do you understand? Low-Gear's creation threw off the balance of every other Gear and created the possibility for every Gear colliding at the time of destruction which triggered the Concept War in the first place. The higher Gears that fought fiercely in that war had to have noticed. There were times when they would choose Low-Gear as a battlefield and destroy a part of it, but later they would find it completely unharmed," explained Hajji. "But you would not have known this. While Low-Gear is an inferior reverse copy of Top-Gear, it also looks a lot like it. During 9th-Gear's destruction, I intended to escape to Low-Gear, but I was approached by that world's anti-Concept War organization and picked up by them."

Hajji smiled on the monitor no one was watching.

He then explained their identity.

"That was the combat organization that preceded the Army. It was the true UCAT that existed in Top-Gear. …And did you know this, Low-Gear? All of you are fakes created as reverse copies of Top-Gear."

And…

"Top-Gear was destroyed by Low-Gear. …It happened on December 25, 1995. I'm sure some of you are familiar with that battle that occurred in the other Osaka."

●

On the moonlit forest ground, white and black giants moved about.

As they knocked over adult cedar trees and tried to break the other's armor, the girl on the white giant's shoulder smiled and asked a question.

"Do you understand now, Ryuuji? Do you understand why I am your enemy and why I am using the surname Nagata?"

"You can't mean…"

The white giant answered by sending out its right sword.

A black sword blocked it and the white giant pushed forward.

"You are the false version of me! In Top-Gear, the Nagata family played the role of the Hiba family and you are Low-Gear's reverse copy of their eldest daughter."

"Th-then let's get along! We're both another version of each other, aren't we!?"

"Yes, but your father and your world destroyed my family and my world."

Tatsumi piled on repeated strikes and Hajji's voice came from Typhon as it flapped its wings.

"Only five residents of Top-Gear survived: Shino, Mikoku, Alex, Tatsumi, and Shinjou Sadagiri. Of them, Mikoku, Alex, and Tatsumi have false versions in this world."

Hiba listened to Tatsumi's quiet voice as Typhon flew up and raised its sword.

"You are reversed inferior copies of our existences, so your sex and other things are reversed. Due to discrepancies between our histories, your ages often don't match up and it isn't uncommon for family names to no longer match after a number of generations. I don't know if it's due to Low-Gear's inferior copies of the concepts, but you do end up corresponding quite closely to us."

Hajji spoke as if in Typhon's place as it flew down.

"Tatsumi's fake is Hiba Ryuuji. Alex's fake is Heo Thunderson. And Mikoku's fake…is Sayama Mikoto. Except for Shinjou who joined UCAT's side, these survivors are the 'true' humans who deserve to inherit the original world. They deserve to inherit the entire world, not this inferior copy."

●

Harakawa frowned as he piloted Thunder Fellow through the night sky.

Hajji's diagram of the twelve Gears was displayed on the cockpit console.

He ascended and clenched his teeth.

"Is this why you're calling us evil?"

The answer over the communicator was in Alex's voice as the

mechanical dragon pursued them.

"Yes, it is because you are a false version of our mother world. And as a fake, you destroyed the ten Gears which are direct children of that mother."

"Please stop!"

Heo's voice was almost a scream as they rose into the sky. She used a tone of rejection.

"Then…Then what was that battle in Osaka!? Why did our parents die!?"

"The rest is simple. I will explain it all in order."

Hajji's face appeared on the monitor.

"9th-Gear's King Sarv realized that Top-Gear existed, as did some in 10th-Gear. Low-Gear took them in, so they opened a gate to Top-Gear after destroying the ten Gears. And they made a treaty. They agreed to settle things between the two Gears before the time of destruction in 1999," explained Hajji. "That treaty was signed by Sayama Kaoru, instigator of the Leviathan Road and father of Sayama Asagi who later destroyed Top-Gear."

●

After knocking some people in black armored uniforms down the white corridor, Kazami noticed the accompanying footsteps had stopped and trembled.

"Sayama!?"

She shouted his name while clearing the corridor by striking her enemy with the tip of the shield removed from G-Sp2.

She turned around and saw Sayama's pale face and slowed pace.

His hand was on his chest and his brow was coated with sweat, but…

"I am fine. I am perfectly fine."

His voice shook slightly, but Kazami ignored it.

"Yes, I wasn't about to worry. Come with me. The headquarters are right up ahead."

She raised her eyebrows in a smile and turned her back.

She ran down the corridor and heard someone forcing strength into their footsteps behind her own.

*…This might be bad. If he hears anything too bad, he could even collapse.*

She thought about that possibility, but Hajji's voice filled the corridor regardless.

"According to the research done by someone cooperating with us, this is the truth. When Low-Gear was still immature, the people of Top-Gear feared the negative concepts would leak out, so they created Babel in Low-Gear as a storage facility that could destroy them if need be. But as time passed, that was eventually forgotten."

"Until it was discovered by Kinugasa Tenkyou who had noticed the Concept War in his research of mythology," muttered Sayama.

Kazami then heard him shout a question.

"Is Babel…No, is Low-Gear itself a spare storage room for the negative concepts?"

"Yes. …And Kinugasa Tenkyou realized Top-Gear existed after entering Babel, so he never told anyone else how to enter the tower and gave this Gear the name Low-Gear. …Isn't that right?"

Hajji's explanation left even Kazami speechless.

*…If that's true, it would place Low-Gear under Top-Gear's control.*

She clenched her teeth and gathered strength in the hand that held G-Sp2.

She opened her mouth and forced out her words.

"But Top-Gear was destroyed. …How can you say all this when you lost?"

"Good question," replied Hajji. "In 1995, Top-Gear was steadily preparing for the final confrontation. Low-Gear must have seen them as a threat and attacked them on the night of December 25, 1995."

Kazami frowned again. That attack would be the battle Sayama and the others had seen in Baku's dreams, but…

"So that battle was…"

"We do not know much because we were out on the front lines fighting back, but we know how it ended. …Top-Gear had planned to join with Low-Gear after the confrontation, so a certain person was attempting to create copies of Low-Gear's negative concepts. However, Low-Gear overloaded the incomplete negative concepts which destroyed Top-Gear. …The side-effects of that passed through the gate and caused a disaster in this world too."

She listened to the voice.

“That disaster was the Great Kansai Earthquake.”

“…!”

She ran on and saw the metal door to the headquarters ahead.

“Sayama! We can stop Hajji from speaking!”

Listening to the weak footsteps running behind her, she dashed down the white corridor.

She saw Kashima collapsed next to the metal barrier.

*…Sorry. We’ll have to wait to help you.*

Hajji was inside and broadcasting his message, so she flapped her wings to accelerate and collided with the metal door.

She slammed G-Sp2’s tip into the barrier.

With a great roar, she and then Sayama charged into the headquarters that the broadcast was coming form.

But once they got a view of the headquarters, they both cried out in unison.

“Oh, no!!”

●

Shinjou stopped firing down the long corridor and blankly hung her head.

Her mind was filled with Hajji’s words and the words of her teammates that had mixed into the broadcast.

Hearing about those past events told her what she had seen in those dreams of the past.

Some of her teammates had “real” reflections of themselves.

But there was one thing she did not understand, so she raised her eyebrows and her head.

“W-wait! You claim I’m a survivor of Top-Gear, but that doesn’t make sense. Mikoku-san and Tatsumi-san are normal girls, aren’t they? So why is my body like this?” she asked. “And my mom was from Low-Gear. If I’m a survivor of Top-Gear, does that mean my dad was from there?”

Itaru answered her from the wall. He coughed and then spoke.

“That’s simple. …You are the daughter of Shinjou Yukio and the true Shinjou from Top-Gear.”

“You mean…” Her surprise had dulled her mind, but she tried to think the best she could. “I’m the child of the ‘real’ Shinjou and the ‘fake’ Shinjou?”

Itaru was not the one to answer her. Instead, a voice echoed from the other end of the corridor.

“Precisely.”

The person descending the stairs wore a black armored uniform and carried a spear in his right hand.

It was Hajji.

“!”

Shinjou frantically got up and raised Ex-St without hiding her surprise.

“I thought you were broadcasting from the headquarters!?”

●

Sayama and Kazami stood still in the headquarters.

They saw Hajji on the large screen before them and all the other monitors, but…

“He tricked us. He pretended to be here when he’s really down below!!”

They both turned toward the room’s exit, but a voice was broadcast throughout the entire building using a transmitter located somewhere.

“Long time no see, Shinjou Sadagiri. Although it seems you do not remember me. Yes.”

It was Hajji’s voice

The console in the headquarters indicated the signal came from the sixth basement.

Shinjou and Hajji were there.

●

Shinjou stiffened in surprise but kept Ex-St aimed at Hajji.

She gulped down a single breath and gathered strength in her legs.

“Is what you’re saying and what Itaru-san just said true?”

“Perfectly true. You would not exist otherwise.” Hajji shrugged. “And you heard that man, didn’t you? Your mother was Shinjou Yukio. Your father was her positive-side opposite, a man whose name is also pronounced Shinjou Yukio. You are their child and your body is a combination of the negative world and positive world.”

Shinjou removed her hand from the trigger and held it to her

chest. She slowly lowered it below her navel.

"I have this body because I was born between those contradictory worlds?"

"Yes. That is why I wanted for you to inherit the world. After all, your mother Yukio was the only person to nearly complete a concept creation theory. Not to mention…"

He smiled.

"She is the only person to betray Low-Gear's UCAT and defect to Top-Gear in search of the true Gear. She cooperated with us. …So how does it feel to learn the truth of your birth?"

Shinjou felt the temperature of her blood drop at the word "defect" and Hajji laughed before continuing.

"Listen, Shinjou. You have been fighting all this time and firing all this time. And every last one of your attacks has been directed at the people of the true UCAT that protected the world your mother desired and in which you were born."

"You're lying! Saying it like that isn't fair!"

She denied it, repeated "he's lying" three times in her heart, and then shouted her reasoning.

"Besides, why would my mom want to defect!?"

"Ha ha. Because Top-Gear called for her, of course. She was building up a concept creation theory, so they asked if she could create Low-Gear's negative concepts. …Do you understand what I mean?"

She slowly answered in a questioning tone.

"Top-Gear was trying to create a place for the people of Low-Gear?"

"Yes. Just as I explained earlier. …But because she left, Low-Gear's attempts to create concepts to use against Top-Gear never left the theory stage and they instead destroyed Top-Gear by overloading the negative concepts Top-Gear had created to take in Low-Gear. …And now the time has come to pay for what you have done. The side-effects of that event activated the negative concepts inside Babel and you are attempting to stop that by releasing all of the positive concepts through the Leviathan Road."

He continued speaking.

"But if you do that, all of the negative concepts will resonate and repel each other. …Top-Gear possessed all of the positive concepts,

but it was unable to oppose the overloaded negative concepts and was destroyed. That means the positive concepts cannot contain the negative ones. Yes. …Low-Gear will be destroyed.”

“Th-then the Army is…?”

“Yes. We are looking at this in reverse. By eliminating the positive concepts, the corresponding negative concepts will be annihilated too. To do that, we must open the doors of Babel and use the concept creation facility inside.”

He asked her if she understood.

“Low-Gear is trying to become the ruler of the world by doing what Top-Gear failed to do and what led to Top-Gear’s destruction. But that is a gamble. They have hidden, forgotten, or altered the fact that the negative concepts will resonate with the released positive concepts and be released themselves. They are falsely claiming that gathering all of the positive concepts and working together is enough to contain the negative ones.”

He took a breath.

“Even though Top-Gear – Low-Gear’s superior – tried the very same thing and was destroyed!”

●

In UCAT’s second basement, Hajji’s voice filled the headquarters and a new quiet voice joined it.

It was Sayama’s voice.

“I must go and stop this one-sided speech.”

“Yes, but at this point, people might think we’re silencing the truth.”

Kazami asked her worried question as if testing him.

She held G-Sp2 and Sayama nodded toward her.

“Some probably will, but he is saying whatever he wants without allowing for a rebuttal. That is not a negotiation,” said Sayama. “And someone who refuses to understand is exactly who we should negotiate with.”

Kazami’s eyebrows had begun to lower, but they moved back up when she heard that.

“Oh?” She stepped up next to him. “Then let’s go. …No, we have to go. Then you can show me.”

She turned her back on the large screen showing Hajji’s face.

“You can show me how you will crush that righteousness of his because I have no idea how to handle it.”

“I will.”

Sayama’s eyebrows twisted as he too turned his back on the large screen.

Kashima slept in the entrance to the headquarters. Most of his left ribs had been broken and a few had punctured his lung, but his defenses as a military god and the protection applied to his lab coat had kept him alive.

It was possible this would have some lasting effects, but the most they could do for him now was place him a more comfortable position. They had also called for help, so they would leave it to whoever showed up.

“We need to go, Kazami. Things are dangerous down below.”

“Right,” she agreed and took the first step.

But then Hajji spoke from the screen behind them.

“Oh, and I have a present for the child of Top-Gear’s destroyer.”

“What?”

Sayama expressionlessly turned back.

He saw the false image of Hajji give a twisted smile.

“Sayama Mikoto? You think your mother attempted a double suicide, don’t you? But let me tell you the truth. After the final battle in ’95, your mother attempted to rejoin UCAT with the Georgius she had in her possession. And when she did…”

Sayama felt his eyebrows rise sharply.

And then Hajji’s voice reverberated through his entire body.

“The Army was still not completely unified at the time and a radical group attacked her. From what I hear, she protected her child from a blade by placing Georgius’s case on top of herself and covering her child with her own body the entire time. She was killed, but UCAT arrived in time to protect her child.”

He smiled bitterly.

“They could not make the incident public, they had failed to protect her, and the rescued child must have passed out and did not remember the crucial part, so UCAT went with the police’s conclusion and announced that Sayama Yume had attempted a double suicide with her child.”

A groan escaped Sayama’s clenched teeth.

Hajji's laughter escaped the speakers.

"Ha ha! But do not worry, Mikoto. I have already taken revenge for you in accordance with our military regulations. I eliminated the criminals. Will you thank me? Hm? And it is an interesting incident. After all, your mother saved you, but you misunderstood that act and have hated her ever since. Ha ha! Truly fitting for the villain of a false world…for a false villain! Even your hatred is false! Your own petty misunderstanding has created who you are today!!"

Sayama heard something like a small stone breaking.

He knew what it was and Kazami was looking at it wide-eyed.

"Sayama, your tooth!"

He had clenched his teeth so hard that the right canine had broken. The flavor of blood flowed into his mouth and…

"Sayama!"

He fell to his knees and collapsed to the floor with his hand on the left side of his chest.

Baku frantically jumped down and poked at his collapsed cheek with his front paw, but he felt no pain from any of that.

All of the pain was in his chest.

The word pain itself filled him and instantly dyed his mind in darkness.

●

Kazami rushed over to Sayama after he fell face down.

She shook him, but his tightly shut eyes would not open.

…*This isn't good*.

The word panic appeared in her mind as Hajji's loud laughter filled her ears.

"Well, Low-Gear!? Do you see your crimes now? Not only are you an inferior copy of Top-Gear, but you destroyed the other Gears, destroyed Top-Gear which is the 'real' version of yourselves and the mother of us all, and even caused a great earthquake in your own world!!"

His laughter rang through the air.

"All of you in the Gear reservations, did you hear the truth Low-Gear has been hiding from you? You should have left your Gear's concepts with another Gear! In that Gear, the peoples of all Gears could have lived without the negative pain found here. But the fakes

were so concerned with their own lives that they broke the treaty they themselves had formulated, destroyed their alternate selves, and damaged their own Gear. …And then they hid it all!!”

He raised his voice.

“What is the Leviathan Road really!? Are they not negotiating for ex post facto approval of their actions while hiding their true crimes!? The activation of the negative concepts and everything else is the direct result of their destruction of Top-Gear ten years ago! And they have failed to reveal that fact while negotiating as the supposed victors of the Concept War! And all while using some ignorant fools as their negotiators!!”

●

The black army cheered on the moonlit runway.

They gave roars of admiration and earnest desire.

“You are the worst Gear that killed your other selves, destroyed the greatest world, caused a disaster in your own world, and covered it all up for your own safety!”

The black army clashed with and pushed back the white army.

“We of the Army will be destroyed here along with you! And we will place Top-Gear’s survivors as the negotiators afterwards.”

Hearing that black soldier, a white soldier trembled and shouted back.

“Are you trying to steal this world!?”

“Steal it? No. We’re returning it. Returning it to the children of Top-Gear who can inherit all of the Gears. …Listen. This may be the only land left, but the inheritors still live. That’s why we’ll die here, why you’ll die here, and why this world will be given to its rightful owners. It will be given to the children of the true world who we have raised for the past ten years!!”

To support the shouting black army, Shino held her philosopher’s stone next to the forest.

“Please understand.”

She closed her eyes.

“Please understand!”

She wrinkled her brow and the white army’s movements shrank while the black army’s momentum grew.

The bloody black soldiers gave a long war cry as they cut down

the white army with their full strength.

"Oh, that was such a rich world and the people were all so kind. And I believed them. They said they would be the survivors of the Concept War and that the peoples of all Gears – including Low-Gear – could live in their world without worrying about concepts. …I truly believed that!!"

"But…but then all of you…!!"

As they collided, a few of the black scattered while a great number of the white scattered.

Their cries of anger roared through the night sky.

"Be destroyed!!"

But someone responded to that.

It was a quiet voice. It was a trembling girl's voice.

It was Shinjou's voice.

Her awkward words sounded like she had completely forgotten a battle was underway.

"No."

She took a breath and her voice was emitted by all of the communicators.

"I don't want that."

●

At the end of the long corridor, Shinjou lowered her head and spoke while pressing the talk button on the communication terminal.

"No matter what anyone says, I don't want that."

She shook her head and inhaled.

"I don't know anything about that."

"That is a child's reasoning, Shinjou. Let me tell you something. … It's true your mother married a Top-Gear man and betrayed Low-Gear, but she must have been one hell of a traitorous woman. She was the one that informed us that Top-Gear was working at creating the negative concepts."

"…"

"She used a method Top-Gear didn't know about to inform Sayama Asagi in a letter. She said that they might become enemies, but that they should both do their best."

Itaru took a breath before continuing.

"Your mother manipulated both Low-Gear and Top-Gear,

Shinjou."

She did not nod.

"I see."

She finally nodded, hung her head a little, and held Ex-St in her arms.

"That's fine."

"What is fine, Shinjou?"

"Well.," she said. "My mom didn't write her true feelings in her letters. Not in those letters she wrote with a weak smile on her face. …But the people she cared about would have known that and they would have known she was the kind of person to actually smile when she was happy!"

So…

"Even if that's what the letter said, the people she cared about would have understood! They would have known she was giving a weak smile of resignation!!"

She shouted out, but Hajji roared back at her. It was a blunt rejection.

"That is an assumption!!"

He slammed the bottom of his spear against the floor as if to say he knew what Shinjou Yukio had been thinking.

The loud sound caused Shinjou's withdrawn body to tremble and he opened his mouth to speak.

●

Miyako crossed her arms in front of the underground communicator.

Gyes and the Moirai watched her silently frowning.

But she listened to Hajji's words.

She listened to his shout of rejection.

"Shinjou Yukio thought she could reconcile Top-Gear and Low-Gear's differences, but she lost everything. Once Low-Gear realized Top-Gear was growing stronger with her concept creation, they made a preemptive strike! As the representative of those who were destroyed, it is my duty to destroy the positive concepts held by UCAT and rid the world of the negative concepts!"

But his next words were spoken in an entirely different tone of voice.

It was a quiet, almost soothing, and yet powerful tone.

“Listen, Shinjou. I don’t think your mother would have wanted this. Hm?”

Miyako reacted to that.

She bit through the chocolate cigarette in her mouth.

“Shinjou,” she said while turning her wrinkled brow up toward the ceiling. “Say it. Tell him. That idiot thinks he knows someone because he’s known them for a long time, but tell him you can get to know someone more than enough even in a very short time.”

She took a breath.

“Show what you’re made of and tell him!!”

●

Shinjou raised her head at Hajji’s words.

She glared at him with her eyebrows slightly raised and he shrugged his shoulders.

“How about it, Shinjou? Will you stop fighting for your mother’s sake?”

“No,” she said clearly. “Because I know my mom.”

Hajji frowned slightly. It was a look of pity.

“I see. But how much do you actually know her? All you saw were some old records, right? You don’t have a single memories of actually speaking with her, do you? What do you have besides assumptions?”

“B-but she was always trying to look strong while hiding who she really was!”

That was…

“Just like I used to!!”

She took a powerful breath and spoke toward the floor.

“Is an adult who says harsh things right by default? Is the most powerful Gear right by default? Is the real one right by default? Is the weaker one that managed to win wrong by default? Is the one that tried to deceive someone wrong by default? Are they really? And if so…is it wrong to survive?”

Her voice rose to a shout.

“If so, has everything I’ve been thankful for been wrong!?”

“Oh?” Hajji responded from the other end of the corridor with his spear on his shoulder. “That just sounds like a girl on the side of evil

refusing to admit she was wrong. …After all, the crimes of this Gear are an original sin they have borne since before their birth. They merely expanded that intrinsic sin ten years ago.”

“Then I’m fine with being wrong. I’m fine with looking wrong to others. We’ll work to do something about ourselves and make ourselves right. We’ll lie and , but as we keep doing that, we’ll gain forgiveness bit by bit, confess our wrongdoings bit by bit, and better ourselves bit by bit.”

And…

“That is why we have villains in this world!!”

She took a breath and spoke even louder.

“Sayama-kun, can you hear me? Right now, I want this world’s righteousness. I want a righteousness that doesn’t exist yet. So you become the villain. You play the part of the evil that does exist and guide us into the future I want!!”

●

In the headquarters, Kazami listened to Shinjou while trying to shake Sayama awake.

“Sayama! Listen! Shinjou’s calling for you!”

But he must have been unconscious because he did not move.

Regardless, she continued shouting to him.

“Sayama!!”

She heard Shinjou’s voice.

She began with an exhausted and bitter laugh.

“Sayama-kun, you’ll come for me, won’t you? Thank you. …But you’re probably exhausted, so I’ll fight for now. I’ll work in place of the villain, so come here as soon as you can.”

“Sayama! Wake up… Wake up already! Shinjou’s asking for your help!”

“And you know what, Sayama-kun?”

Kazami thought to herself as she listened to Shinjou.

*…There’s no point in me hearing this!*

She practically squeezed Sayama as she shook him, but his pale face remained motionless.

And she heard Shinjou’s quiet voice.

“Um, Sayama-kun? I learned something while listening to this Hajji person. …It’s about something long ago and about something I

just told you about yesterday.”

She paused for another “um” before continuing.

“It’s about right after I lost my memories and was taken in by UCAT.”

She took a breath and seemed to hesitate briefly.

“Itaru-san told me someone would come for me someday, but no one ever came for me and I cried and cried. That was nine years ago. …And you know who it was who was supposed to come for me?”

“Sayama!”

Kazami shouted his name just as Shinjou gave her answer.

“It must have been you and your mother! Do you remember what you told me a long time ago? When your mother took you out that last time…”

Kazami made sure to carve Shinjou’s words into her heart.

“She said you were going to meet someone important. …That’s what she told you when you left, wasn’t it? So…I might be wrong, but I still believe it. So come meet me. I’ve been waiting for you to come for me. …I’ve been waiting for nine years!! So…”

So…

“So I’ll call for you! I’ll call the name of my precious villain!!”

Kazami raised her fist just as Shinjou gave her cry.

“Sayama-kun!!”

●

A breath later, a new voice came from every communicator connected to UCAT.

It was a boy’s voice.

“Did you call for me?”

He took a deep breath before continuing.

“You called for me, didn’t you? Thank you, Shinjou-kun.”

The owner of the voice slowly took another breath.

He took two breaths and spoke slowly as if savoring his words.

“And now that you have called my name, I will race to your side, Shinjou-kun.”

●

Shinjou stared wide-eyed at the corridor terminal, but she soon

smiled.

She nodded and tears drops from the corners of her eyes.

“Will you come for me, Sayama-kun?”

“Yes, I will.”

Sayama’s voice answered in confirmation.

“Of course I will make my way to you. And…I am sorry, Shinjou-kun. It is my fault that you were left alone for those nine years.”

He continued speaking from there.

“Are you listening?” he began. “Are you trying to fight right now, Shinjou-kun?”

“I am,” she said before taking a strong breath.

She immediately let out the breath and tightened her grip on the cannon in her left arm.

“That Hajji guy is on the other end of the corridor.”

“Is that so?” he asked. “Then, Shinjou-kun.”

He continued.

“Two minutes. Please wait just two minutes.”

●

In the headquarters, that boy trembled as he stood in front of the monitors that no longer displayed anything.

He placed his left hand on a terminal to support his shaking body and placed his right hand on his chest.

“Yes, just two more minutes.”

He slowly inhaled and sent more words to that girl.

“Just two more minutes. I will reach you after a total of nine years and two minutes, so keep fighting until then. If you do…”

He nodded.

“In two minutes, I will absolutely, certainly be there to protect you.”

●

Shinjou smiled bitterly at what she heard.

*He hasn’t changed,* she thought as she said one last thing.

“You can push yourself.”

She removed her hand from the terminal’s talk button.

She faced forward and at Hajji down the corridor.

“Eh?”

The metal spear was already right in front of her.

"!"

She back-stepped in surprise, but Hajji pursued with spear in hand.

"Two minutes? I'm not waiting that long. No."

He stepped forward as he spoke.

"After all, I have not been waiting nine years. I have been waiting ten years for this day."

Resignation filled his voice as he thrust the spear forward.

Shinjou did not have time to avoid it, but…

*…I'll do something!*

She only had to last two minutes.

"I'll do something!!"

Just as she raised her voice and tried to think of something, she saw someone's back move between her and Hajji.

It was Ooshiro Itaru's back.

"Hey, Sf. Your master's about to be injured. Aren't you going to stop it?"

"Tes," replied Sf's voice. "Because this is what you want."

A moment later, Itaru's back shook as Hajji's spear blade struck him.

"Itaru-san!?"

She shouted to Itaru as he crumbled to the ground with the color red staining his chest.

Hajji took a step back to put some distance between them and Sf ran forward to support Itaru.

Shinjou gasped and saw a bitter smile on Itaru's lips, so she frowned.

"Why? Why!? Why would you do that, Itaru-san!?"

"You want to know?"

"O-of course I do!"

"Then I won't tell you."

He spoke forcefully, but the bitterness left his smile. This was a smile Shinjou had never seen him make.

He then doubled over and coughed up quite a lot of blood.

It was too much to contain in his hands.

The red color covered Sf's apron, but she said nothing, held his shoulders, and pulled him back.

She then looked up at Hajji with a sharp gaze.

"Do not worry about my master. Please continue."

"That's right. Yes. …And I am satisfied that I was able to defeat one of Top-Gear's destroyers."

Immediately after he spoke, Sf held her right hand out toward Hajji and produced a handgun.

She gave the man an expressionless look past the gun.

"I have determined that comment is not what my master desires. …He himself desired to receive your attack and protect Shinjou-sama, but he does not wish to be dishonored by you. Tes?"

"I will answer with 'tes', proud automaton."

"Tes."

Sf bowed and made the gun vanish with a wave of her hand.

She glanced over at Shinjou and pulled Itaru's unmoving body over to the stairs.

"Shinjou-sama."

She took a breath.

"One minute and forty-five seconds to go. …Please forgive us for taking up so much of your time."

Hajji reacted to her words by laughing.

He showed his teeth as he laughed in resignation.

"A wonderful job buying some time. But Shinjou, I'm sorry to say it doesn't look like you are going to last the remaining minute and forty seconds, does it?"

He emphasized his question with a "hm?" as Shinjou raised Ex-St.

But an even more obvious answer came from beyond Hajji.

That answer came in the form of a person located far away.

He was just stepping down from the distant staircase.

It was not Sayama. The person who had arrived too soon was a large man whose white armored uniform was in tatters.

He was covered in blood and unsteady on his feet.

"Sarv… You're still alive?"

"Sarv is dead. Abram still lives. That is all there is to it."

Abram looked to Shinjou and nodded.

"Shinjou, fall back to the metal door behind you. And Hajji, will you help me buy some time? Or does 9th-Gear's general prefer to run from an injured opponent?"

Hajji snorted and turned to Abram.

Shinjou stepped back, but Hajji was no longer focused on her. He spoke to Abram.

“Why do you support this world so much? Hm?”

“That is a simple matter.”

Abram used his shaking hands to hold his metal spear under his arm.

He stared straight at Hajji with his one eye and twisted his lips up into a smile.

“Yes, a very simple matter. Because the villain will be here in another minute and a half.”

“Do you really think he can make it here? The Army has been positioned all along the way here.”

“Anyone can answer that question. …Anyone from Low-Gear anyway.”

Abram took in a breath and puffed out his chest.

“Attention, all UCAT personnel!!”

●

Abram’s voice filled the sky, the building, the ground, and everywhere else.

“The fake field operations director of this fake world has an announcement!!”

The pilot of the blue and white mechanical dragon in the sky listened to the voice while quickly rotating out of the way of an attack.

“You may not believe me and you may want to give up on this world, but…”

The pilot of the black god of war made repeated sword s trikes in the forest and listened to the voice coming from the communicator in the machine’s head.

“Just a minute and a half more! Please keep fighting for another minute and a half!”

The wielder of a large white sword defended from the ground and listened to the voice coming from the building.

“After that, the villain will begin the negotiations! He will determine whether those of us on the side of evil should be destroyed!!”

The voice rang out.

“So don’t give up until then!!”

●

As Kazami heard the voice in the corridor, she looked to Sayama who ran alongside her.

He was panting and holding his chest, but the sweating had stopped and his complexion had improved.

Baku was swaying happily on his head.

But Kazami looked to Sayama’s head itself.

“Are you okay?”

He glared back at her.

“Is that anything to say after punching someone? What if the blow ends up making me go crazy?”

“In your case, I think it would make you go normal.”

She laughed quietly and pulled a cellphone from her pocket.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Hm? Emailing a friend. I didn’t get back to my dorm yesterday, so I didn’t set the machine to record the documentary my dad appears in. It’s called ‘The Zoo’s Grand Panda Breeding’. …Have you heard about it? It’s about a panda couple named Lew-Lew and Ewd-Ewd.”

“Won’t your father record that? It is his job after all.”

“My dad’s hopeless. He claims recording it will steal his soul.”

“Thank you for telling me about that odd rule.”

Meanwhile, Kazami decided to send an email home while she was at it.

She sent “I’ll be back home tomorrow”.

*It’s not that I’ll “probably be back”. I will be back,* she thought. *I’ll work to make sure I get back.*

*I kind of feel like talking with them, so maybe I should bring Kaku with me and spend the night.*

With that thought, she put her phone back in her pocket and looked over at Sayama.

She felt like laughing when she saw him running in his suit, so she did.

“I never thought I’d end up running alongside you.”

“It is an unexpected turn of events for me as well, but this is not the first time. We did the same in the battle with 1st-Gear. And

Kazami, I know it is a little late to repeat myself, but can I say much the same thing I did back then?”

Kazami nodded as she spotted the reason for his comment up ahead.

Seeing her nod, he did the same thing as back then.

He lowered down and launched his body forward.

And without turning back toward her, he spoke.

“Kazami. As you are now, I can leave this to you.”

A woman stood in their path. The large woman wore a white combat coat.

She looked to Kazami instead of Sayama.

“Oh? I was waiting for the Izumo descendant, but this is interesting too. I’ve heard all about the girl named Kazami who bears G-Sp2, the weapon with our Concept Core sealed inside.”

Sayama cut past her, but she ignored him and swung her arm.

“I am Jord of 10th-Gear, I am Betrayed Expectations Jord, and I am Izumo Kaku’s grandmother. …How about you take me on? You wield our world itself, so I need to make sure you have the necessary resolve.”

“Oh?’

Kazami’s eyebrows rose as she stopped and faced Jord.

“Is that so? But I’m sorry. Kaku doesn’t talk much about the 10th reservation, so I’ve never heard of you. Also, I was just accepted by my stupid underclassman, so I’m feeling really embarrassed and feel like going on a rampage to hide it. …I’m not going to hold back, so I hope you have some resolve too.”

Jord narrowed her eyes.

“Ho ho. Well said. Well said indeed. You’re a good girl. I haven’t met a good girl like you in a while. …I can’t help but want to see you cry.”

She swung her arms and machineguns slid out of her sleeves and into her hands.

She held the grips just as Kazami raised her wings and held up G-Sp2.

They fired and charged in simultaneously.

# Chapter 35

## “Word of Expectation”

Listen, idiot

●

White wings and bullets intersected in a white corridor.

The bearer of the wings, Kazami, was no longer running.

Driven on by and ducking below the stream of bullets, she quickly glided through the air and performed rotating acrobatics.

She advanced swiftly and spun around as if flying.

She took instant leaps using the acceleration of her wings.

She turned by rotating around the weight of her spear.

Those two methods allowed her to practically fly through the narrow corridor.

She moved quickly, but she moved in perfect curves.

Even when she changed direction, rotated around Jord, attacked, or reached a wall, she did not slow.

She moved left, right, front, back, up, and down. She moved nimbly back and forth the corridor like a constantly swinging pendulum.

She maintained her speed and none of her movements were wasted. But…

“My attacks aren’t reaching her!?”

She fired while wrapped in wind, but none of the shots affected Jord.

Jord’s defenses went beyond simply *seeming* like nothing was happening.

*…There really is nothing happening to her!?*

Her body did not waver in the slightest and she did not brace for impact.

She remained perfectly casual.

Kazami attacked the thinner parts of her clothing and even her exposed face or head, but none of it worked.

Thinking this was impossible, she reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out the blue sphere that had been Ikkou.

- **—Attack power is infinite.**

Trusting in the voice she heard, Kazami attacked Jord from behind again. But…

“That isn’t gonna work.”

Jord moved a thick arm behind her and the machinegun it held spewed bullets.

"…!"

Pursued by the sound of the bullets hitting the wall, Kazami flew backwards to put some distance between them.

She pulled up her legs and raised her speed to distance herself as much as possible from the approaching bullets.

"…"

She managed to escape the movements of Jord's arm and gun.

She looked up and saw Jord still had her back turned.

Viewing that as a sign of confidence, Kazami leaped down the center of the corridor and rotated around using G-Sp2.

She made a U-turn.

This brought her back on a path toward Jord and she asked G-Sp2 a question.

"What do you think happened there?"

"I don't know."

*I guess you wouldn't,* she thought. *What is this defense of hers?*

*…It's different from Kaku's.*

Izumo's could be described as "sturdiness", but Jord's was more like an outright "negation".

It was simply too powerful.

*…Is that because she's a 10th god?*

She had heard about a Gear called Top-Gear just a moment ago, but ignoring that one, Jord belonged to the highest of the eleven Gears. It would make sense for her to have powerful conceptual defenses.

But all of the concepts and concept texts Kazami was familiar with had a single effect.

This gave them a great functional advantage, but they always had some kind of weakness.

*In that case,* she thought as the setup for her denial while raising her wings for a midair dash.

*…Am I done for if I can't figure out her concept?*

Repeated attacks, attacks from behind, and even infinite attack power were no use.

She realized this all came down to knowing her opponent.

"————!"

And she flew.

By the time she let out a short breath, she had already passed by Jord's back on the right.

The woman rotated her right arm down to bring it back up behind her.

The bullets tore through the floor and then toward Kazami.

"!"

But her rising arm was stopped by her shoulder blade, so she could not bring it all the way up.

Kazami kicked off the air and took a safe route over Jord.

That was when Jord made her next move.

She raised her left arm over her shoulder to intercept Kazami.

But instead of firing the rifle at Kazami, the bullets tore into the air to her upper right.

Kazami's path over Jord's back would take her through the path of the bullets. Meanwhile, Jord's right arm shot up.

"…"

And more bullets tore into the air to her upper left.

Gunfire and bullets crossed and Kazami's path was sealed off by an X of bullets.

But she continued flying regardless.

She twisted her body so she was facing up. She thrust her navel toward the heavens to slip above the crossing bullets with a Fosbury Flop.

"…!"

The bullets grazed her wings and light scattered from them.

"…!!"

But she cleared them.

She instantly twisted further to take an upside-down position and immediately launched an attack.

Even as she moved away, three strikes shot out of G-Sp2.

By making the final blast especially strong, she launched herself away from Jord.

"!!"

After feeling and hearing all three hit, she looked over at Jord, hoping to find some clue to solving the mystery.

She learned three things.

"Kh!"

After passing by, Kazami landed five meters from Jord.

She spun to face Jord and landed in a crouching start.

She lifted her hips higher than her shoulders and raised her wings while recalling that one instant.

She had confirmed three things.

First, Jord had turned toward her and smiled as she passed by.

Second, there was a fresh scratch on Jord's cheek.

And third, there was a small wrinkle in the corner of Jord's eyes.

*…That means…*

First, Jord's smile had been a challenge to figure out the secret behind her defenses.

Second, Jord had been injured for some reason.

And third, Jord worked to look younger in addition to her natural long lifespan.

The second fact was especially meaningful.

*…She doesn't have perfect defenses.*

Something had given Jord that slight injury, so Kazami could damage her if she used the same method.

But what had caused that injury?

And s she thought about that method and completed her crouching start, she also realized she could not let her guard down with Jord.

The third fact she had noticed was proof of that.

"You still try to look young at your age?"

Kazami gathered strength in her shoulder blades which controlled the wings.

"You think you're tricking everyone else, don't you!?"

She flew as she shouted.

The flapping of her wings extended her body, her legs moved her body forward, and speed reached her soon thereafter.

She advanced.

She seemed to move in fast-forward as she arrived above Jord with her spear raised overhead.

"…!?"

But she could not swing the spear down toward the two rifles raised from below.

And as Jord raised her arms and bent her beck, she quickly crossed her arms in an X-shape.

On top of that, she rotated on the spot.

Her heels sounded on the ground as she turned to the right and fully covered the area directly above herself.

There was no way for Kazami to attack.

“Shi-…”

She swallowed the rest of her curse and cut through the ceiling with her raised spear tip. She then moved away to put some distance between them.

She flew straight for the floor and landed.

She forcibly flipped her body around and faced Jord again.

She was not about to leave her back to the woman or show any other opening.

She kept a low stance. Her body was almost parallel with the floor and her chest nearly touched her shadow.

Her bangs swayed with the momentum of her turn, but she had settled into her stance before they swayed back.

It was an abnormally low crouching start.

She moved her right leg far back and pulled her left leg up next to her chest.

She spread her arms to the sides with the spear tip held backwards in her right hand.

Her wings were spread upwards.

She could launch herself at any moment and she only needed a single breath to gather her strength.

And so she inhaled.

She took in a single breath and stopped.

A moment later…

“…!!”

She shot forward and up.

There was not much she could do in so short a time.

She rotated forward while tightly holding the backwards-facing spear.

She used all of her strength to perform a forward flip and carried the spear like a shoulder throw.

The spear tore into the ceiling and the sound of destruction exploded out.

But the attack did not hit Jord. As Kazami swung the spear downwards, it proved too short and swished through the empty air

above the woman's head.

So Jord laughed.

"You're never going to hit if you run on pure momentum."

"This worked just fine!"

Kazami was not looking at Jord; she was looking at the ceiling.

She had torn a straight line through that ceiling and she had a single reason for doing so.

"The collapse of the ceiling will hit you, won't it!?"

●

Before, Kazami had seen a scrape on Jord's cheek.

It had likely come from a flying fragment of the surrounding walls or ceiling.

Jord could not be damaged by attacks made with weapons.

*…So won't she be damaged by an attack from something other than a weapon!?*

While flying over Jord's head, she had used her raised spear tip to make a shallow cut through the ceiling.

From there, only a single powerful strike was needed.

With that…

"Break loose and cascade down, ceiling!!"

She smashed the ceiling and instantly flew past Jord.

First, the ceiling panels broke apart. Next, it was the plumbing and wiring.

But above that was the great pressure of the concrete surrounding the underground floor.

An artificial stone wall two to three meters thick filled the area above the ceiling.

G-Sp2's cutting power had slice through that.

"I did my job."

That message appeared on its console just as a rapid wind tore through the ceiling.

"!!"

The ceiling exploded.

●

The sound of splitting stone continued on and on as the building materials came crashing down. Dust surrounded them while sparks

and pebbles rained down, but the true threat came afterwards.

"Fall, chunks of rock!!"

Just as Kazami shouted from the air, a great piece of concrete crashed down into the corridor.

It was far from being small and far from being alone. More and more gray chunks several meters across fell to the floor and easily stabbed into or broke that floor.

But Kazami did not care.

She spread her wings, forcibly decelerated, and landed on her right tiptoe.

As soon as her foot reached the ground, she heard an especially large piece of rock fall behind her.

It was a block of the concrete that surrounded the corridor and that concrete was about three meters thick. She did not know the size of the piece that had broken off and fallen, but the sound suggested it weighed more than a ton.

Even if Jord had divine protection like Izumo's, she would not escape something like that unharmed.

"Okay."

Kazami turned back toward the collapse.

Dust rose below the hole covering several meters of the ceiling.

She saw smoke spreading out with a sound much like sand, but she kept herself ducked low.

She saw a form appear within that smoke.

"It can't be."

She took a defensive stance, but quickly realized it was only a piece of concrete two meters tall.

At the very least, Jord was not visible from here.

Kazami breathed a sigh of relief.

She lowered G-Sp2 in her right hand.

"Ah."

And she finally brought her left hand to her forehead. While she was at it, she also frowned.

"I guess that was Kaku's grandma. Maybe I went a little overboard."

*What should I do about this?* she wondered while looking up at the giant pieces of stone with a sigh.

That was when she heard a voice.

"Too bad."

It was Jord's voice.

Before Kazami could stiffen, Jord stepped casually out from behind the especially large piece of concrete. Not only that…

"You're completely unharmed!? Did it not hit you!?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course it hit me. Do you really think I can avoid every last one of these with so many of them falling at once? A woman needs to be solid. …At least solid enough to repel something like this."

Kazami looked to the giant stones filling the corridor and realized Jord was telling the truth. Some of them had directly hit her.

But Jord was completely unharmed. Her clothes, face, and hair were untouched.

Not only was she unhurt, she did not have a single stain on her.

Kazami gasped and Jord's expression changed when she saw that surprise.

She smiled so Kazami could see.

"You thought I couldn't be hurt by weapons, did you? It's really too bad. You were so close."

Jord moved both her hands, but she was not holding a weapon in either one. Instead…

"Oh, c'mon. Where are you even looking? The floor's what matters."

Kazami looked down and saw two grenades rolling down at her feet.

*Not good,* she thought just as she realized what Jord's concept was.

*…Her concept is…*

A moment later, a large explosion shook the corridor.

●

A twelve square meter room had light purple carpet on the floor and two sofas facing each other across a table. A large TV and a bookcase filled with books were by the wall.

The room could be seen as a living room or a parlor.

Three people sat in the room: a married couple and a man.

The husband picked up a cup from the table and held it out toward the man sitting across from him.

“Izumo-san, please drink some. My wife’s tea really is delicious.”

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I know I’m stopping by at a ridiculous hour and, well, I thought I would just say hi real quick. But…how should I put this? Sorry for the trouble, Kazami-san.”

Izumo Retsu took the white cup and brought it to his mouth.

Just as he took a sip, Kazami’s father gave a straight-faced comment.

“It’s actually super sugary.”

Retsu began to choke, but he may have been too stubborn to just spit it out because he looked away and held a handkerchief to his mouth.

After about three seconds, he forced it down.

“Khahhh! I won!”

“Well done. I should have expected that from you, Izumo-san.”

Kazami’s father applauded and sounded truly impressed, but Retsu sounded out of breath when he replied.

“Well, sorry you had to see that. …But why would you give me that?”

“You know how you give saltwater to an unwanted guest? Well, you’re the opposite, so I decided to take the opposite approach.”

“Sorry about that. There is no stopping my husband once he sets his mind to something like this.”

“Y-yes, I can tell from the TV shows he makes. Like…what was it? That five-minute show that airs every morning where you show up at politicians’ houses unannounced. It was ‘What Kind of Screams do People Make When You Jab a Finger in Their Ass?’, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, Ass Scream? Lately, the higher ups have been pressuring us about editing it a little, but the viewers love it because they get to hear the real voices of the politicians. That’s why I was thinking of visiting the one’s pressuring us starting tomorrow. That way, we can hear *their* true voices.”

Kazami’s father lifted his right hand and his wife pulled some cigarettes from below the table.

He took one and turned to Retsu.

“Mind if I smoke?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Then I will.”

He pulled a completely different cigarette from below the table

and lit it. This one was as thick as his arm.

"Ahhh. …You don't seem surprised, Izumo-san. This disturbs most people."

"Well… To be honest, I've gradually grown to enjoy all this."

"Yay!"

The married couple exchanged high fives and then turned back to Retsu.

"Sorry. To be honest, Chisato and Kaku-kun were here last night."

"Oh? Both of them were? That I didn't know."

"You're lying about that, aren't you?"

Retsu was left speechless when Kazami's father leaned forward and pointed at him.

But the other man only leaned further forward, placed his open hand next to his mouth, and whispered to Retsu.

"I just wanted to say that."

He straightened back up and smiled. Retsu smiled bitterly and drank some of the sugary tea.

"Is this how you control people in your projects?"

"I'm nothing special. …I only got into it because I like to stand out and I like to gossip. Do you know what my debut job was?"

"Wasn't it managing your wife who was your classmate?"

"No, no."

He grabbed a remote control from the table.

It belonged to the video player and he played a recording on the TV.

"When I was in college, a crime documentary I made and sent in was actually used. It was about the murders of the couple who ran a local set lunch store."

A staticky video of a winter street appeared on the screen. A reporter wearing glasses walked next to the fence of a large house. His expression was terribly serious, but…

"Ha ha. Why do I have an afro?"

"Kazami-san, I thought you didn't record your work?"

"The me in this tape can die for all I care. I followed the case purely out of curiosity, my viewpoint got distorted, and I never got anywhere near the truth. This is a shame I need to leave a record of. And…"

He stared at the screen.

"The couple who ran that store had a strong connection to IAI. And not just a connection. For some reason, they were treated like employees. They even had company IDs. But their daughter didn't know and neither did anyone else. If anyone did…and this is just my instinct talking…"

The TV displayed a house across from a ramen shop.

"It would have been the old man named Sayama who lived in this house. He also had a connection to IAI for some reason."

"What if I knew the answer to all that? I am IAI itself, after all."

Kazami's father turned toward Retsu.

He looked directly at the other man without saying a word. He stared at the slight smile on Retsu's face.

Afterwards, Kazami's father suddenly smiled as well and shrugged.

"That's too boring. And not fair on my part. Our connection comes from my Chisato's explosion of pheromones as such an intensely wonderful girl, but I would be using her feelings if I used that connection to get an answer out of you."

"Oh, then my apologies."

"No need to apologize. This just shows how great my daughter is."

"I'm jealous of how well your family gets along. I really am. Mine is so cement-like."

Kazami's father laughed at that.

"C'mon, Kaku-kun's a good boy! After all, the only thing on his mind is letting my wife and me see a grandchild as soon as possible."

"Ha ha ha. That idiot really is a positive-minded sexual criminal, isn't he?"

"But what's wrong with being honest about yourself? …You know my wife used to sing, right? It was apparently brought up a lot in school when Chisato was a kid, so she never sings in front of us. … The things parents most want to see are what the kids tend to keep between themselves."

He scratched his head and gave a bitter smile.

"Well, for how strong-willed our daughter is, she tends to withdraw into herself a lot."

"That's part of being a good girl. Only if they know their own

worth, though."

"I'm not so sure she does. …Two years ago, she apparently hurt some other girl's leg while competing for a regular spot in the club. It was the naginata club. And when I asked her why, she said she had felt she didn't belong in that regular spot, so she swung in a random direction to create an opening and lose. But her opponent charged right in at that random direction. What do you think of that?"

Retsu crossed his arms at the question.

After a while, he gave a troubled smile with lowered eyebrows.

"She must have thought she was the only one in the wrong there. …But what did you tell her?"

"I told her only to attack when she really would hit. …And she's done a good job of following that. I think she instinctually knows she'll only hurt herself if she does anything she isn't fully committed to."

Retsu laughed and crossed his arms again.

"What a wonderfully energetic girl. My son has a pretty weak body and it seems my wife had a lot of trouble because of it."

"Yes, but he seems to have gotten a strong mind out of it. He's managed to pull Chisato along with him and allowed her to enjoy her life."

Kazami's father continued from there.

"Earlier, she must have solved some trouble she was having at work…no, in her life. She sent an email saying she would be here tomorrow. …Will you stop by too, Retsu-san?"

"No, I should be far too busy at work tomorrow."

"Is that so?" Kazami's father smiled and looked to Retsu. "But Chisato really is enjoying her life with Kaku-kun. She still worries about things, but she has someone to discuss it with. This is what you call true entertainment! Isn't that right?"

He showed off his teeth in a smile and raised his cup for a toast.

"She's probably enjoying herself now too. She must be on a stage she feels she can perform on."

●

Dust ran through the corridor for the second time.

It was made by Jord who had been covered in the first wave of

dust from the ceiling.

The explosion from her grenades had destroyed the floor and smashed the walls.

The building materials were terribly damaged. It looked like too much damage even for grenades.

"Well, she did up their attack power to infinite."

Jord's hair blew in a wind mixed with waves of smoke. She sighed and looked up.

"Is this all the bearer of 10th-Gear's Concept Core can do? … How boring."

She spat out a "keh" of disappointment toward the floor and took a step forward.

She had no active interest in what the Army was doing, but she felt she should put in some more work since she had come to help.

Hajji should have just about reached the Concept Cores by this point.

She had blown away G-Sp2's bearer, so she needed to retrieve 10th's Concept Core from within.

The Concept Core of 10th-Gear was the source of the world tree's power and of the gods' power. The 10th-Gear reservation was controlled by an inferior copy, but Jord was certain it would be a richer place with the real thing.

Hajji would probably tell her to hand it over, but she could always confront him too.

"That's right. 9th-Gear's great general versus a member of 10th. What kind of battle would that be? I doubt I would escape completely unharmed."

At that point, she heard a voice through the spreading smoke.

"You are *really* full of yourself, aren't you?"

The voice was accompanied by a visual form.

It was a girl with raised eyebrows, a white spear in hand, and white wings on her back.

Jord frowned and came to a stop as the girl spoke.

"You aren't like Kaku. He only pretends to think so highly of himself…but you're different."

The smoke cleared and scattered to fully reveal her form.

She was five meters away and the white spear had transformed. The stabilizing wing for flying was raised in the back and

shimmering heat came from the back end.

But no one rode the spear that had taken its flight form.

Kazami was completely unharmed as she held up the spear, so Jord frowned again.

“Did you use the regeneration of 10th-Gear’s Concept Core?”

“Sorry, but G-Sp2 isn’t that kind to me anymore.”

The girl smiled bitterly with sweat on her brow and she expelled a breath that held some small bit of strength.

“Did you forget? The attack power in here is infinite. Just as your grenades exploded, I used G-Sp2’s short range super acceleration to break the sound barrier.”

“You hit the infinite explosive blast with an infinite shockwave?”

“Yes. They use that method during actual rescues, don’t they?”

Kazami lowered G-Sp2 and shrugged.

“G-Sp2, first form.”

The weapon began its transformation.

Jord frowned as it powered down, but Kazami ignored her and removed the shield from below the spear tip.

The action was awfully calm for a battle and G-Sp2 must have found it odd too.

“Is it over?”

But Jord saw Kazami smile at the weapon’s question.

“No, we’re just about to win.”

*Impossible,* thought Jord, but G-Sp2 reacted differently.

A “♪” mark appeared on its console. It seemed to unconditionally trust Kazami that they would win.

The girl then began to move.

She mounted the long narrow white shield on her left arm and casually walked over to Jord.

Jord raised her arms to fight back and pulled handguns from her sleeves.

All attack power was made infinite in this space, so there was no point in using larger guns.

Jord took aim and shouted out.

“Do you really think you stand a chance!?”

But her question did not reach its target.

Kazami instantly arrived right in front of her.

“…”

Kazami almost looked bored as she tapped her right shoulder a few times with the spear shaft resting there.

“Are you mocking me?” asked Jord. “Do you think that spear can break through my defenses after you shut down its power?”

Kazami did not answer.

Instead, she suddenly looked to the right.

She ignored Jord and looked at the empty wall there.

She was in the middle of a battle, and yet she left herself entirely defenseless.

But just as Jord gasped at the action, Kazami swung G-Sp2 with all her strength. The weapon moved from the girl’s right shoulder and into Jord’s left cheek.

“———!!”

An instant later, Jord realized she had flown to the right and slammed into the wall.

The impact shook the air.

●

Feeling a solid hit for once, Kazami looked down at her right hand.

She could tell G-Sp2 was also shaking a bit from hitting their opponent.

“It stings,” said the weapon.

“It does,” agreed Kazami as Jord stood from her kneeling position by the wall.

“Why you…!”

Jord spat a broken tooth to the floor and held her left cheek as she stood.

Her entire body shook with rage.

She already stood powerfully in front of Kazami with her large chest thrust outward.

The handgun had vanished from her right hand and a white shotgun had left her sleeve in its place.

“It’s time you were blown to pieces!!”

Before shouting, raising her weapon, or even speaking, Kazami took action but without gathering her strength.

She spoke to G-Sp2 in her right hand.

“Do you think our attack will hit?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I.”

With a quick snap of the wrist, she swung the shield in her left hand to strike the center of Jord’s gut from below.

The woman doubled over and crashed into the ceiling.

The building materials crumbled as they stopped her. They wrapped around her and refused to let go.

As she hung down embedded in the ceiling, the shotgun fell from her hand and her lips twisted in anguish.

“You…”

“Yeah, how should I put this? It looks like I’m the one that gets to see you cry.”

Kazami tilted her head at what she was doing and at the result. She also looked up at Jord.

“Your concept isn’t a defensive power. Instead of thinking about what put that scratch on your cheek, I should have been thinking about why it was put there.”

She rested G-Sp2 on her right shoulder and shrugged.

“You’re *Betrayed Expectations* Jord. You gave the answer yourself. In other words, your concept betrays other people’s expectations. Anytime someone thinks they’ll hit or thinks they’ll do damage, it’s negated.”

She tapped the tip of her right foot against the floor along with her next two words.

“And. So. If I wanted to hit you, I just had to believe it probably wouldn’t hit. The scattering fragments scratched you because they were an attack without a will behind it.”

Jord began to slip out of the ceiling.

She was going to fall, but just before she did, she bared her teeth and asked a question.

“But how can you attack without thinking you’ll hit? A technique like that requires serious mental focus, so why would some random girl know how to-…”

“That’s simple. I did the same thing two years ago. I attacked while thinking it wouldn’t hit and that I would lose…but I did hit. I’ve gone back over that moment countless times over the past two years.”

She smiled a little.

“But now I think I know why my attack unintentionally hit the other girl. She must have been trying to lose as well. That’s why she came straight toward my attack.”

*I really am weak,* she realized again.

At the time, she had been trying to escape the pressure of being a regular and she had been so focused on herself that she had assumed the other girl’s injury was entirely her fault.

She had not tried to be with someone else.

*…Thank you.*

She thought about that girl who was now in another class and apparently the captain of that club.

*If it hadn’t been for that incident, I never would have met Kaku.*

*…I don’t stand a chance against her now.*

*Thank you.*

“I’m glad I’m so weak.”

She smiled and spoke just as Jord fell from the ceiling.

Seeing that, she closed her eyes.

*Now I can’t even see Jord.*

She spread G-Sp2 and the shield to either side and began to spin around. She spread her wings and spun and spun like she was dancing. She spun until she was dizzy.

*It’d be a miracle to hit her now.*

“Now, then.”

With those words, she held a single expectation in her heart. She thought of the unlikely and she thought of her opponent as she smiled and spoke to Betrayed Expectations Jord.

“Die.”

A moment later, her super swing of G-Sp2 hit something.

It was an unexpected lucky hit.

# Chapter 36

## “To the One Waiting For You”

I will go
And protect what matters to me

●

Racing footsteps and sounds of impact passed through a windowless white corridor.

The gunshots, clashing swords, shouts of anger, demands to identify oneself, and everything else could not stop the running footsteps.

The unstoppable footsteps belonged to a boy in a dark blue suit.

He had a small animal on his head as he ran down the corridor.

Three men in armored uniforms appeared from both sides of a fork up ahead and they opened their mouths.

“You’re Negotiator Sayama Mikoto, aren’t you!? Stop him!”

“Let me just say that it is impossible.”

Sayama answered just as they raised their submachine guns.

A moment later, he pulled a red sphere from his suit pocket.

- **—Only truth fills the world.**

Only two sets of gunfire sounded. The center man was unable to fire his warning shot.

“!?”

He looked down at his unmoving fingers.

Sayama cut through the center of the two streams of fire targeting him and charged toward the third man.

He stepped up to the central man and jumped upwards.

“The truth is surprisingly boring.”

He slammed his right heel into the base of the man’s neck.

The man in black armor’s breath burst from his mouth and the two on either side pulled out knives for close-quarters combat.

“Damn you! Are you going to put up a futile struggle!?”

Despite the blades on either side of him, Sayama made rhythmic steps after landing.

“A futile struggle? What on earth do you mean? All I am doing is going to meet Shinjou-kun. Could you not get in my way? It would be a tragedy if I was late for my two minute promise. …After all, it would make Shinjou-kun sad!”

“Damn you! What matters more to you!? Settling the world’s problems or a date!?”

“You fool! Do not combine two unrelated issues!!” Sayama pointed at the man as he shouted. “Besides, going to see Shinjou-kun is obviously more important than settling the world’s problems!! Listen. I am the negotiator. If I do not go meet her, the negotiation cannot even begin, so logically settling the world’s problems has a lower priority level than Shinjou-kun. …Do you see a problem with any of that!?”

“W-wait. Wait just a second. The…the concept here prevents anyone from lying, doesn’t it?”

“Of course. And if you understand, then open a path. Getting in my way as I visit Shinjou-kun is the same as getting in the way of settling the world’s problems. And doesn’t the Army claim to want to settle those problems!? What you say and what you do simply do not match up. I demand that you make a more appropriate decision!”

Sayama sighed and walked past the men who were lost in thought.

He turned right at the fork, ran down it, and said one thing more.

“Of course, nothing says it has to be Hajji who settles the world’s problems with me.”

“Damn you!!”

Once the men caught on, they raised their guns behind him, but he ignored them and ran toward an intersection up ahead.

He soon heard gunshots and saw bullets flying past him.

Except the bullets flew from up ahead and continued on behind him.

He heard three groans of agony behind him and passed through the intersection.

A few dozen automatons hiding in the right and left corridors raised their skirts and curtsied as he passed.

“Testament. Sayama-sama, we will assist you as you-… Wh-why are you ignoring us!?”

“Ha ha ha. Sorry. I’m a bit of a hurry. I used up too much time back there.”

One of them began running alongside him.

“#8-kun? How is the old man?”

“Testament. He is needlessly full of life. More importantly, take this.”

She held out an orange backpack. It was clearly filled with

something and Sayama gently checked on the contents when he took it.

When he did, something poked its nose out at him.

“Sayama?”

It was a 4th-Gear plant creature. After confirming it was Sayama, the creature looked at the scenery flying by on either side.

It also lifted its body of grassy fur and began expelling air.

“You must have been very tired, Sayama-sama. As this is an emergency situation, we automatons held a mental meeting and decided to borrow 4th-Gear’s power as a cure-all medicine. Please enjoy having your excess heat drained as you run.”

“I will.”

Sayama put on the backpack and the plant creature exhaled oxygen while happily swaying its body.

“Shinjou… Promise, promise!”

“Yes, I made a promise with Shinjou-kun. I am glad you understand.”

He had a feeling #8’s expression suddenly changed as she ran alongside him.

*…?*

Confused, he touched the red sphere in his suit pocket.

He removed the truth-enforcing concept and turned to #8.

He stared at her usual expressionless face, but…

“What is the matter, #8-kun? Did something sad happen to you?”

“No… No, not at all. Automatons do not have the emotion of sadness.”

She faced forward as she answered as if the question was a needless fear.

But one of the few dozen automatons suddenly spoke up from behind them.

“You have to tell him, #8! UCAT Director Ooshiro treated her like a dog! And she appeared to cry!”

“I-I did nothing of the-…!!”

She realized her outburst might as well have been a confirmation, so she lowered her eyebrows a little.

“I am sorry you had to see that.”

“I do not mind. And excellent work on the dog roleplaying. But you have nothing to be embarrassed about. Unlike me, everyone

else is into some crazy thing they want to tell people about but do not know how."

She nodded and faced forward with her usual lack of expression, so Sayama asked her something else.

"Is there anything I can do for you now?"

"No, a maid can never ask anything of her master. A maid's job is to assist with her master's work to an extent that does not qualify as directly helping."

She closed her eyes and faced him again. When she opened her eyes, they contained a slight smile.

"Give us a job, Sayama-sama. I have determined that is the best possible thing you can do for us."

"Testament. An excellent answer. And so let me say this: help me reach Shinjou-kun in the most dashing and stylish way possible. This is a job that only you can do. And…"

He faced forward.

"If you do that, I will thank you for it."

"Don't you mean Shinjou-sama and you will?"

"I will be the one taking Shinjou-kun's thanks. You must not steal someone else's due."

She briefly paused at that answer.

"…"

"Did I say something odd?"

"No," she said.

She bowed as she ran and slowly lowered her hands behind her.

He saw her smile and open her mouth to speak.

"I have determined it is an honor. Not only are you giving me a job, but you are thanking me as well."

"Oh? Are you that certain you will receive my thanks?"

"Testament. I have determined it is certain. After all…"

She swung her arms forward which sent black metal components spilling out of her sleeves, skirt, and apron.

Up ahead, several people in black armored uniforms were blocking off the corridor. She quickly assembled a heavy machinegun aimed at them and she finally finished her sentence.

"Yes. After all, a maid who does not fulfill her master's demands is nothing but a mere woman."

Gunfire rang out and Sayama raised his speed with a smile. He

also checked his watch.

"Fifty-eight seconds left!"

●

Sayama ran.

He moved straight down the artificial white structure, kicked off the wall at the turns, and practically fell down the stairways.

The enemy was numerous, but he had comrades to run up and fight back.

He felt like they were welcoming him back as they fought alongside him.

He had only been gone for a single day, but…

*…It feels so nostalgic.*

Kazami and Izumo were likely fighting. Hiba, Mikage, Heo, and Harakawa would be fighting their opponents without giving up despite how tough those opponents were.

Kashima was probably coming to and the automatons and other units would be fighting to clear a path.

Everyone welcomed in his race and they all illuminated his destination.

"Very good."

He muttered to himself as his footsteps shook his body.

"I have no objection to being the center of the world."

He was now certain that he was the world's central point.

He now realized he had taken things too easy before. With the violent husband and wife, the slightly perverted man of metal, and the flustered yet nihilistic mechanical dragon, there had been less reason for him to fight himself.

At the very least, he felt they had ended up relying on each other.

*…But this is different.*

They were not relying on each other. They simply felt it was natural for the others to do their job.

They could do what they wanted without having to rely on someone else.

After all…

*…Our pasts demand it all.*

Each of them was ordered on by their own heart.

So if his teammates opened a path for him, that was what they

wanted to do.

It was not an effort or pain, so he must not apologize to them. They had not given up or called it quits.

It was better to thank them instead.

But the greatest reward would be to fulfill his own job.

"We need strength. We need the strength to resist and protect."

He opened his mouth as he ran.

He took a breath.

"Our Gear needs the strength to resist our own evil."

He jumped down an open stairway ahead and slowly raised his left hand. He kicked off the steps and spun around as he dropped down the stairs. The sign on the next landing said BF5.

He was one floor away and had twenty-three seconds left.

Realizing that, he thought.

*…How about we fight, everyone?*

"And Shinjou-kun."

*…I…*

"I am here to be a true villain."

If their opponents knew their sins and were telling them to die, he would defiantly throw atonement back at them. That was the role of a villain and UCAT hoped to help that villain.

So he did not hesitate to open his mouth and begin with a single word.

"Everyone!!"

His first call functioned as the starting point of his next words.

Those next words were the ones only he could speak.

"I will say it now. …The surname Sayama indicates a villain!!"

●

UCAT personnel were fighting with the black army over the control room for the lift on the fifth basement. They also heard a voice come from the speakers.

"After sixty years and ten years, let us finally hold the true negotiations here."

In the fifth basement's large storage area, Ooki raised her head to listen as she wrote out healing charms.

"Listen, everyone! Begin the attack! Pour your voice of resistance into your magazines and blades and pour your voice of anger into

your armor and shields. Tonight, we shall express ourselves like that as we negotiate. …And listen carefully, everyone!”

Tsukuyomi listened to the communicator as she drew her overheating Heavenly Moon Bow in a corridor.

“Ahead, ahead, go ahead! These people are using the past to tell us to die, so grab them by the collar and give them a blow to show them that we’re still full of life!”

●

Susamikado flew above the forest and avoided Typhon’s homing bullets while listening to Sayama’s voice.

“I, Sayama Mikoto, use my authority as Team Leviathan’s representative to announce that we shall begin the Leviathan Road anew here, that we will not give in to any power, that we were wrong but will correct ourselves, and that we will carry this through to the end no matter how much disgrace it brings us!”

#8 and the other automatons fired down the corridor while memorizing the words they heard via their shared memory.

“Now, I have my orders for you all. Do not die until I have completed the negotiation. At the very least, survive longer than me. After all, I will not die. And with that established, I gave another order. God once said to return the favor when people do things for you, so…”

Izumo fought and thought of his partner while listening to the words of his dumb underclassman.

“So if they are telling us to die, do the same to them!! But in exchange, do not kill them. Let them live so we can let them die. Our mercy will obey the laws of conservation and be returned to us by the enemy!! Did you hear that? Make sure to let each and every one of them live!!”

Thunder Fellow flew almost as high as the clouds while listening to the order arriving over his own communicator. He repeatedly accelerated to avoid the surging waves of missiles flying in from behind, but the voice gave no thought to those circumstances.

The owner of the voice took a breath.

“Where is your answer?”

Kazami heard the question as she ran further below the white building.

She saw something of herself in the boy who had collapsed once but had gotten back up to run and she slowly opened her mouth.

She had a single answer. She only had to lift the ends of her eyebrows, smile with the corners of her mouth, and say it.

"Testament!"

●

All of their strength heard those answers that were equivalent to their wills and thoughts.

Testament.

In the seen, unseen, reachable, and unreachable battlefields, innumerable overlapping voices returned that holy thought.

It was a holy thought, but it now applied to the side of evil.

It was a contract.

Tes, tes, tes. We make the contract here.

The countless contracts washed over their bodies and set all their strength in motion.

The movement was especially striking on the surface where countless powers were visible.

A white wave crashed into the black wave and broke apart.

"Oh!"

They pushed and worked to overpower them.

They had powerful wills and spirits, but the fact remained that their numbers had been worn down too much already.

Even if they continued to fight, none of them were sure how it would turn out.

At that moment, large doll #2 was attempting to charge at the white group, but it was suddenly destroyed.

"!?"

Everyone opened their eyes wide, thinking it was an explosion, but they soon heard something else.

A great sound of metal being struck came from above and every part of the giant metal doll was thrown to the ground.

All of the power and noise produced wind as it collided with the asphalt runway.

Nothing remained above the surface.

It had all been crushed.

Everyone glanced around, wondering what had happened.

They soon heard a man's voice speaking English.

"Roger, Roger. What do you think of this battlefield? This looks nearly over, so did we make it in time or not?"

"Testament. Colonel Odor, according to my memory, the battle still has a ways to go. In Japan, they have a final weapon known as the bamboo spear that outdoes even self-destruction, but they have yet to use it here."

"What? A bamboo spear? A bamboo spear, you say? Have they developed ecology into a practical weapon!?"

"Testament." Roger nodded. "They use it for camouflage, they cut down bamboo grass during the summer for small interceptor missiles, and they add on charms covered in magic spells that borrow the power of zen."

"How frightening! What a frightening collection of Eastern culture this country is! Is Heo's brain safe here!?"

The voices came from the east end of the runway.

Two men, Odor and Roger, stood there with two female forms accompanying them.

The tall one was Diana and the other one was Brunhild.

Behind them, transport trucks raced through the canyon.

This was American UCAT. Odor commanded them in his suit and he brought a hand to his chin as he looked across the black and white forces.

"What is it? What is it? Aren't you going to continue? Or do I need to give you a signal? We were delayed dealing with the crashed mechanical dragons, but I will hit you with a few dozen times the odor to make up for it."

The rumbles of engines shook the ground and the headlights formed a backlight for the woman and the girl. Diana opened her mouth toward Brunhild who held a black cat.

"It would be best if 1st-Gear's inspector did not take part in this battle, Little Brunhild."

"What are you talking about, Little Diana? I'm not here to fight the Army."

Brunhild faced forward as she quietly spoke.

"My battle with you during the mock battle with 2nd-Gear never had a clear ending."

"Shall we settle this with one point per person?"

Brunhild shook her head.

"Shooting a black one is one point. Shooting a white one is a one point penalty. How about that?"

"Why are you assuming you're going to be shooting us too!?"

They ignored Izumo's shout and walked forward. The two men did as well.

Odor gave a deep, powerful smile and raised his right hand.

"Fine then. Fine then. If you do not win here, we cannot demand an explanation from you, so American UCAT has no choice but to support this poor tiny country's UCAT for the sake of the whole world's justice! So let me add my voice to the chorus of my mother tongue: Testament!!"

●

"What is this testament nonsense!?"

Someone cried out in an underground space.

It was Hajji who wielded his steel spear in the center of the long corridor labelled BF6.

Abram's defense-oriented stances and movements had moved Hajji around and away from the metal door he had set as his goal.

Angry about that, he sent his spear forward, received Abram's desperate and continuous jabs, and had piercing holes opened in his side and his left and right femurs.

"No matter how many of you shout in unison, it will not bring back the worlds you destroyed!!"

Hajji used his right arm to knock Abram's spear upwards.

"So I have something to tell your villain! Our past cries out with an accusing righteousness!!"

●

"You won't let us die? You'll let us live? Let us live!?"

On the surface, Mikoku moved about to protect Shino near the forest.

Her opponent was a sword god. A single strike of his weapon easily tore apart the earth for several meters.

She was repeatedly cut, but she continued to fight without withdrawing.

The sounds of their sword strikes overlapped as she listened to

Hajji's raised voice.

"Simply laughable! That very same conceit is what led to destruction sixty years ago and ten years ago! You only speak of evil to hide the righteousness you are too embarrassed to show. But that is false righteousness. You are merely fooling yourselves with your own conceit, false world!!"

A civilian truck and trailer were stopped in the mountains of Okutama. It belonged to the Army.

Young men controlled the dolls from inside the trailer. They had been tasked with removing the dolls' limiters. Once the limiters were removed, the dolls could only continue moving for five more minutes.

But the back door suddenly opened and another man entered.

The young men turned around and were shocked to see who it was.

"Manager!"

He said nothing and began maintaining the different devices. He was trying to extend that limit of theirs by eliminating the waste in the machines' outputs.

Small sounds came from the different controllers and Hajji's slow voice reached them.

"Think about it. It is fake. It is all fake. If everything walking through this world, everything moving through it, and the world itself are all fake, then even your holy words and your sincerity are fake! The heavens and the earth, the sky and the land, the abysses and the depths of the sea, the wind and the light, and everything else in this world are asking to be denied!!"

Tatsumi kept Typhon attacking and raised both her hands.

She raised Typhon's wings and fired bullets of light.

She almost flew into that light in her pursuit of Susamikado and she listened to their leader's voice.

"But listen. This is now the only place left to hold our thoughts and this world's residents have committed several sins. I will now list those seven sins for you!!"

Thunder Fellow managed to move up behind Alex, so Alex did his best to forcibly rotate and shake off that enemy.

But their difference in weight allowed Thunder Fellow to catch up and open the mouth of his main cannon.

A moment later, Alex purged all of his additional accelerators.

"!"

Water vapor exploded out and the pressure dropped Alex's speed.

His accelerating foe shot by overhead and it was his turn to pursue that enemy from below.

As he did, he heard Hajji reading off the charges.

"Listen to Low-Gear's sins."

They were…

"First, they were the cause of the time of destruction! Second, they killed their neighbors by destroying the ten Gears! And third, they killed their own mother by destroying Top-Gear! Fourth, they slaughtered their other selves! Fifth, they damaged themselves by causing a disaster in their own world! Sixth, they covered it all up to avoid the issue! And seventh, they tried to bring the world under their control while hiding their own sins!"

Jord got up from the hole smashed in the corridor wall and realized she was surrounded from both corners of the corridor.

She smiled bitterly, swung down her arms to produce weapons from her sleeves, and listened to Hajji's voice.

"Cry out, everyone! Open the gate to genesis by sounding the trumpet of judgment on these seven sins!"

Whether underground or on the surface, every part of the black army cried out.

"Judgment!!"

Their voices joined as one and called out seven times.

Judge, judge, judge, judge, judge, judge, judge.

Here, we apply holy judgment to the seven sins.

"Be destroyed, sinners! The only vindication for you lies in the afterlife!!"

With that shout, Hajji stepped forward.

He instantly sent his spear into Abram's body and the man rose up into the air.

"————!!"

And he rotated his metal spear to send it directly into the man.

●

Hajji knew this was the end.

His enemy was defenseless in the air. His enemy's arms were

extended backwards from the impact and he could not move them forward in time to defend or attack.

Hajji was confident he could kill the man.

His spear tip shot forward.

"!"

But he heard a voice just before he did.

It came from Shinjou who stood in front of the distant metal door.

"Abram-san!!"

At the same time, Hajji saw Abram's lips mouth the word "sorry". Abram also moved one hand that had been knocked backwards.

He was not using it to attack Hajji or to defend.

With a snap of his wrist, he threw his spear toward Shinjou far behind him.

He attacked Shinjou.

And Hajji heard a voice.

It resembled his own voice. It *was* his own voice and it meant a concept was activating.

- **—Everything is reversed for an instant.**

Hajji saw Abram vanish from before his eyes.

Instead, Shinjou was there. Tension filled her face as she held Ex-St up as a shield.

"…!"

But she completely caught Hajji's spear with her weapon, so the damage sent her through the air instead.

"!!"

The tip of the spear raced across Ex-St's surface and tore into Shinjou's armored uniform as she flew.

But Hajji was looking at Abram beyond her.

*…Even after all this, I still didn't defeat him!?*

He clenched his teeth at that thought and ran.

He checked his watch.

"You still have thirteen seconds until your two minutes are up, Shinjou, but I'm sorry to say that it's over for you here. I am indebted to both Yukios, so I will make it a painless end."

Hajji pursued the hurting girl flying back from him and prepared for a second blow.

She was doubled over in the air and he took the final step to reach her.

But in that instant, someone moved between him and the girl.

He recognized the person.

“It can’t be!”

●

Before Hajji’s eyes, a boy circled around and blocked his way. He also spread his arms as if to hide the girl from Hajji’s view.

The boy wore a vest, but his shirt sleeves looked bright in the lights.

Hajji had brought his spear low to strike the girl, so he used it on the boy instead.

If he continued running and plunged the spear into the boy’s stomach, it would all be over. The color staining his white shirt would be the color of true life filling this white space that claimed to be righteous.

He instantly made up his mind, but something else happened even more quickly.

Something like a wall shot toward him from below.

“———!?”

He realized it was a coat, but where had it come from?

The boy’s arms had been spread, but his hands had been empty.

The only possible answer was the feet.

When charging in, he had spread his arms to draw Hajji’s focus. By kicking up the coat he had placed on his feet, he could slow Hajji’s reaction.

And it worked.

The coat covering his face confused Hajji.

He shook his head to knock it loose, but it wrapped around him as if embracing him.

*Why?* he wondered just as an impact reached his shins.

He was knocked up into the air.

●

After sweeping his enemy’s feet out from under him, the boy saw that enemy bring his right hand to the floor and rotate around.

The man swung his spear, it grazed the boy’s left arm, and he felt

pain.

But he did not care.

Without bothering to check on the pain, the boy turned around.

What mattered was the girl, not the enemy. With that in mind, he raced backwards.

*…That coat will not be easy to remove from his face.*

A 4th-Gear creature was clinging to the back of the coat.

If the plant creature was cut, it would only become two smaller creatures, so he had asked if it was willing to use that advantage to help. It had agreed.

But this only bought some time.

The boy knew that very well, so he pursued the girl.

His gaze was raised nearly to the ceiling and he saw the girl's parabolic arc enter its fall.

He reached out toward the falling girl.

He could not reach her, but she would be hurt if she fell with that much momentum.

So the boy kicked off the floor, extended his hand, extended his fingers, and managed to grab the edge of her armored uniform.

"…!"

He breathed out as he forcefully pulled her toward him.

Her limp body almost seemed to jump into his arms.

He secured her and shook her slender body with the arm grabbing her shoulder.

"Are you okay!?"

His feet seemed to tear into the floor as he stopped. She did not answer him, but she did move.

Her eyelids opened a little and her gaze turned toward the boy.

Her sweaty face, disheveled hair, and slightly teary eyes faced him. And…

"Eh?"

Her eyes fully opened.

Her black eyes reflected his expressionless face and he stopped his feet when he saw it.

He lowered her to the ground, supported her back, and smiled bitterly.

"What is your name?"

She hesitated before answering.

“Shinjou… Shinjou Sadagiri.”

“Is that so? Then Shinjou-kun, Sayama Mikoto has come for you just as you wanted.”

“Yes…”

Shinjou nodded blankly, but tears soon filled her eyes and her face twisted.

“Yes!!!”

Sayama laughed, tightly embraced her, and finally came to a complete stop.

He turned toward Hajji who stood five meters behind him.

“But I must apologize, Shinjou-kun. I broke my promise. …After all, I arrived three seconds too early. …Isn’t that right, Hajji-kun?”

Hajji snorted back at him.

He threw the coat and the plant creature to a corner of the corridor and stared straight at Sayama.

“So you’re here, foolish negotiator. I hope you and your obsession with yourself fall into the depths. Yes.”

Sayama laughed at that and brushed a hand through his hair.

“Ha ha. I will surely fall whether you hope for it or not. But there is no limit to how far humans can fall. So let me say this.”

He pointed at Hajji.

“You are about to lose to a fool and became a super fool.”

# Chapter 37

## “Restraining a Great Sin”

Your heart is screaming
For you to fulfill it
For you to show it off
“It” being your attack on the past’s hesitation

●

Kazami followed the shortest route indicated by the automatons and raced down the stairway to the sixth basement.

Sayama would be facing Hajji down below. She did not know the exact situation, but they had made a promise.

*…So that idiot can definitely pull this off!*

"G-Sp2, second form."

That was the cannon form. If Hajji had his back to her and she saw Sayama and the others were in danger, she would fire.

With a shot from behind, Hajji could even die from the impact if he was unlucky.

And if she did kill him, she would have to live with that fact.

But she did not hesitate. She had decided to stop him if he was going to harm Sayama or Shinjou.

Her eyebrows rose in thought as she ran.

*…This is the job of an upperclassman.*

Once the bottom of the stairs came into view, she spread her wings.

Her body floated up and her footsteps vanished.

"…"

She needlessly spread her arms to grasp at the air and she slowly fell through empty space.

"Then let me ask you something, negotiator."

She heard Hajji's voice beginning the negotiation.

●

When she heard Hajji, Shinjou looked to Sayama's back in front of her.

He had removed the coat of his dark blue suit, so she could see his vest. His lowered left arm had a gash near the elbow of the shirt and the forearm was stained red.

*…Is he okay?*

His back answered her with silence.

She could only look in the same direction as him. There, she saw Hajji in his black armored uniform.

The man turned his powerful gaze directly toward Sayama.

"I will ask you about the seven sins I mentioned earlier, plus one

other question. That makes eight," he said. "And no matter how you answer, I will be taking the Concept Cores after the eight questions. Fortunately, 7th's Concept Core seems to be here too. That is terribly convenient. Yes."

Sayama crossed his arms at the man's low voice.

He nodded and Shinjou heard him speak.

"I see. Eight questions is quite a lot of trouble, Hajji-kun. So please hurry it up. And to help…"

She saw him arch his back and jerk his chin toward Hajji.

"Ask your questions, Hajji-kun. I shall answer them all at once after I have heard all eight."

●

Hajji did not immediately respond to Sayama's suggestion.

He kept his spear prepared in his right hand.

He had a single thought: there had to be a reason for that suggestion.

*…This boy said he would answer all of them at once after hearing all eight.*

What was his reason for speeding things up with a single answer instead of a conversation of question and answer?

After all, it was in Sayama's best interests to stall for time here. That would allow his allies to arrive.

But he had requested that Hajji quickly make all his requests so he could answer them all at once.

*…Why? Why rush this?*

Sayama was a negotiator and he had dealt with several Gears' representatives.

*…And this conversation is being broadcast to every UCAT and reservation.*

Both of them had to be careful what they said, so Hajji thought about why Sayama would rush this.

"…"

His sight found the answer.

He spotted it on the boy's crossed arms.

Sayama was holding his left arm to hide it, but it was wet with blood.

Hajji could tell he had lost a lot of blood.

*…If we alternated between question and answer, he would need to think about and discuss each question individually.*

But if he heard all eight questions first and gave his eight answers in a row, there would be much less discussion.

*…So he is shortening this due to his bleeding.*

*I see,* thought Hajji. *That is not a problem.*

It was also safer for Hajji to finish the negotiation quickly and make off with the Concept Cores.

And even if Sayama was bleeding badly, Shinjou behind him was unharmed.

Abram was on the verge of collapsing, but he did indeed stand in front of the metal door.

In that case, Hajji decided it was best to avoid any unnecessary work.

“Fine then. I will ask my questions.”

He took a breath and began to speak, beginning with number one.

“First, how do you justify your Gear causing the time of destruction?”

That question received a response. Shinjou shouted at him.

“Th-there’s no way we can justify that! We weren’t the ones who made this world!!”

Hajji did not say anything back.

Instead, Sayama nodded and tilted his head back toward her.

“Listen, Shinjou-kun. It is still Hajji-kun’s turn to speak. We must not interrupt him.”

“…Uuh.”

She reluctantly nodded and hung her head, so Hajji sighed and spoke to Sayama.

“I thank you.”

“Then can I say that you owe me one?”

The boy smiled bitterly and Hajji did the same. He also sighed again.

“Then I retract my thanks. I can’t have you thinking I owe you anything.”

Before Sayama could say anything, Hajji asked the next question.

“Second, how do you justify killing your neighbors by destroying the ten Gears?”

The Leviathan Road would accomplish that, so Hajji knew it was a relatively meaningless question.

But the larger the number of sins in his list, the worse an image it gave his enemy. And those in the Gears who still did not approve of their allegiance with Low-Gear would still want to continue with that question.

*It is an important question,* he thought as he continued on.

"Third, how do you justify killing your mother by destroying Top-Gear, which is the mother of us all?"

He did not stop there.

"Fourth, how do you justify killing your other selves? And fifth, how do you justify causing a disaster in your own world and killing unconnected residents of Low-Gear?"

At that point, Hajji looked to Sayama.

The boy was expressionless. He silently stared back with his arms crossed.

He looked like he was thinking, yet he also looked like he was not.

But giving him time here would only allow him to come up with a satisfactory answer.

On the other hand, the questions had been prepared from the beginning. And over the course of ten years.

*…Acting self-important would only irritate those who have lost so much.*

So Hajji formed his words. As the spokesman for those who had lost so much, he used his mouth like a speaker.

"Sixth, how do you justify covering up these sins? And seventh, how do you justify hiding your sins and yet attempting to bring the ignorant survivors of those Gears under your control through the Leviathan Road!?"

Hajji raised his voice and inhaled.

In front of him, Sayama remained expressionless and had not spoken since quieting Shinjou.

Hajji shook his head a bit, cracked his neck, and looked at Sayama again.

"Now, time for the eighth question. But let me warn you first. …A slight misstep in answering this question will be a grave error indeed."

He held his spear below his arm and made sure Sayama, the

others in front of him, and anyone behind him were not moving.

"What do you think of this?"

He pulled a black stopwatch from his pocket and placed a finger on the button.

"Outside of the concept space, over a thousand bombs have been hidden throughout Tokyo's major stations, shopping districts, and regional residential districts. If I press this button, they will all detonate."

Faced with this sudden demand, Shinjou's eyes opened wide while Sayama remained expressionless.

"Surrender. If you do not, I will press the button."

●

Shinjou gasped.

She gulped, forced down a breath, and somehow managed to speak the word in her heart.

"S-Sayama-kun!"

That name produced a slight smile.

But not from Sayama. It came from Hajji.

*…Kh.*

Her frustration nearly escaped her as words.

She wanted to swap places with the man using Yonkichi's concept, but that required him to take hostile action against her.

He was not making any kind of attack.

Instead of fighting, he had taken hostages.

"Th-that's not fair!"

"Not fair? Which do you think is higher? The number of people who will die in the bombs I have set up around Tokyo or the number of people who died in the Great Kansai Earthquake ten years ago? And with that in mind, let me ask something else. Will you repeat your past mistake or will you prove that you have learned from that mistake?"

Hajji held the stopwatch up at chest height.

"Can you think about that tragedy from ten years ago? Your parents died then, didn't they?"

As if to answer, Sayama's back swelled up before Shinjou's eyes. He had taken a breath.

*…What are you going to do? Do you have a plan?*

Hajji said people would die if they did not surrender.

She doubted Hajji was lying. If he triggered the bombs, he could simply say it happened because UCAT had not learned from the past. It would not hurt him in the slightest.

Hajji gave a weary sigh and held the button up as he spoke.

"Listen, Sayama. Please… Please do not make me press this button."

He tilted his head.

"What is your response as Low-Gear's representative?"

"…!"

*He got us,* thought Shinjou as she bit her lower lip.

This was all being broadcast to the UCATs and reservations around the world.

And they would all know what Hajji was saying.

*…If he presses the button, it's our responsibility! And it will make UCAT out to be completely selfish and evil!*

She wanted to do something and she gathered strength in her right shoulder where Ex-St rested.

But then she heard Sayama speak.

He also languidly cracked his neck.

"I see. Fortunately, Hajji-kun, it would seem the two of us have reached a consensus. So let me give you my answer to your 'don't press the button' competition."

That answer was…

"If you want to press the button, go right ahead. It is none of my business."

●

For a moment, Hajji did not understand what Sayama had said.

Once the words travelled to his brain via his ears, he rolled them around in his mouth a bit and finally…

"You fool!!"

The word "disappointment" appeared in his heart.

He raised the stopwatch and began to squeeze the finger on the button.

*…I'm sorry. If they had changed from a decade ago, this wouldn't have happened!*

He had to prove to the Gear reservations and the other UCATs

that UCAT had not changed.

It had to be in a way that no one could deny and no one could forget.

His enemy had agreed to that. All that remained was for him to sully his name as the one who actually performed the bombing.

"…!"

He moved to press the button.

But just as he did, Sayama spoke.

"But I am surprised, Hajji-kun. …I never thought you wanted to kill the people of Low-Gear this badly."

"!?"

Hajji reflexively stopped the finger he held on the button.

He frowned and looked to Sayama in doubt.

Meanwhile, Sayama bent back to look down on him.

"What is the matter? Don't you want to press it? If that is what you want, go right ahead."

Sayama spoke with a smile on his lips.

"But let me say one thing. …I do not want you to press that button. Also, your actions here are the actions of the entire Army. Do you understand what I am saying?" He took a breath. "You are pressing that button even though I am saying I do not want you to. Are you perhaps finding any flimsy excuse you can to fulfill your own desire to kill the people of Low-Gear?"

"No!" Hajji shouted back on reflex. "I care for the people of Low-Gear!"

"So you claim. …But either way, you intend to find some reason to press that button, don't you? …It all sounds like excuses to me. Even a pig can claim to care for people."

Hajji's cheeks twisted at Sayama's words, but the boy slowly tilted his head and continued speaking.

"You are a surprisingly disgraceful man, Hajji-kun. Please think about this carefully."

He slowly used his chin to point at the explosive switch Hajji held.

"As for that button…listen. You decide whether you will press it or not."

"What do you mean by that!?"

"Is it really that surprising? Isn't it obvious? Neither of us trusts the other much. And looking at this as a part of our negotiation, it is

even more obvious," declared the boy. "Simply put, the truth behind your words and actions only exists inside you until you let it out. In. Other. Words."

Sayama gently shook his body and posed on the last three words.

He then smiled and continued.

"If you want to kill, then show it by killing. If you do not want to kill, then show it by stopping."

"This negotiation is about your surrender! Are you going to abandon those innocent lives!?"

"Look in the mirror and say that again. …I fight in place of those innocents and I am negotiating as their representative, so on a fundamental level, I cannot use them as a bargaining chip."

He looked directly at the man.

"But I can say one thing as their representative: please do not kill them. And I can say one other thing as the one who fights on their behalf: I cannot surrender."

He raised his left hand and pointed at Hajji.

"If you insist on using those innocent people as a bargaining chip, I can say something else from my position."

"What is that?"

"It is simple. This is not the give and take of negotiation. It is death or defeat. You are asking me to see value only in the survival of the innocent people. But their survival should not even be a question. So I must establish a clear give and take on my end."

He spoke clearly.

"You and your Army will be killing a large number of innocent people, so I demand that you surrender, retract all seven of your accusations, and immediately cease all acts of agitation toward the Gear reservations. That is my equivalent demand assuming you use those innocent lives as a bargaining chip. And…this is a negotiation you suggested in the first place!!"

"…!"

"If you gave no thought to this while taking these hostages, I can only imagine you truly wanted to slaughter this world's people with no resistance whatsoever!!"

●

Shinjou's eyes opened wide as she looked to the back in front of

her.

Sayama was turned slightly to the side as he strongly pointed at Hajji.

“I will now give my answer to your seven questions.”

That answer was…

“How do you expect us to answer that now, you moron?”

“…!!”

Shinjou saw Hajji bare his teeth. The strength in his shoulders was near bursting and Shinjou switched Ex-St to standby mode without thinking.

But Sayama kept the words coming without fearing Hajji.

“Listen. You have no proof of any of these supposed truths. Top-Gear? What are you talking about? The real us? Who is that? A false world? Never heard of it. Are you going to compare the DNA lurking inside these ‘true’ versions of us with the lively genes residing inside us? If you do not at least do that, you may have some credibility, but it is still a gray zone!!”

“Enough lies!” roared Hajji as he turned his strength into words. “You are bluffing! Can you not imagine the lives on the other end of this button!?”

“Oh? You are still being rather rude, but at least you are finally willing to acknowledge bluffs. Excellent. Now, let me tell you something. In this audiovisual age, people’s imaginations are only triggered by what they can see or hear right in front of them.”

Sayama took a breath.

“You claim there are lives on the other end of that button? All I can imagine is you deciding to move your finger and then pressing that button! It all comes back to your will! Do not blame the button for the killing!”

He shook his head toward Hajji before continuing.

“Also, you spent an entire decade putting together these questions, yet now you are demanding an answer in the middle of a battle with no time for evidence, examination, or discussion!? We have no way of determining whether there are any traps hidden in those questions. After all, we are just as foolish and ignorant as you have said!! What if rushing our answer here ends up harming some other Gear!? That would be a terrible problem!”

*…Wow. Dragging the other Gears into this really isn’t fair.*

Shinjou did not speak her thought out loud. She simply opened her mouth in surprise.

She let out a breath and spoke her true thoughts to the back striking a pose in front of her.

“Sayama-kun, I thought rushing to an answer was the only thing you knew how to do.”

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, it only looks that way because my mind works so quickly.”

“Is that so?” she said, sounding unconvinced.

At the same time, she heard Hajji’s voice.

“I see.”

She looked up and saw he had lowered his tensed shoulders.

His expression had cooled and he threw the stopwatch to the floor.

“So you refuse to have a serious conversation, is that it? Then let us say that the Army tested you and you did your best to avoid the issue. With that said…”

He used his right hand to support the spear held under his arm.

*…Here he comes.*

She had predicted this. After hearing the answers to his eight questions, he would come to steal the Concept Cores.

Based on everything that had happened, he likely intended to attack them and break through the door.

*…He is coming.*

She nodded and searched through her armor’s waist pocket with her left hand.

Once he ran forward and swung his spear to break through, she would swap places with him using Yonkichi’s concept. That would point him in the direction she was facing now.

It would only last an instant, but turning around would create a large time lag.

It would create an opening to attack.

And she looked to Sayama in front of her.

His unclosed left hand hung limply at his side and blood from the elbow covered the fingers.

“…”

Just as a drop of blood fell to the floor and splattered…

“!!”

Hajji gave a roar and moved.

●

In a kneeling sniping pose, Kazami had a hand on G-Sp2's trigger.

She targeted Hajji with one eye closed.

*…I have to stop him!*

But her eye saw something other than Hajji's back.

For some reason, she saw Shinjou's surprised face instead.

"Eh?"

Her instincts found the answer faster than her thoughts.

Hajji had used a fighting tactic she specialized in, so she reflexively called out.

"Above!!"

She did indeed find Hajji in the place indicated by that word.

The bottom of his armored uniform spread out near the ceiling above Sayama and Shinjou.

He was jumping over them all.

He had made it look like he was taking on the two of them and then he had abandoned the fight.

*…Is he settling the battle between the Army and UCAT instead of this personal confrontation!?*

He jumped high, kicked off the ceiling, and landed behind Sayama and Shinjou.

Those two turned around, but it was too late.

He was already running down the corridor. The only thing in his way was Abram who could definitely be called badly injured. Abram would be an obstacle, but he had no chance of winning now.

*…So will he steal the Concept Cores!?*

Panicking, Kazami aimed G-Sp2, but Shinjou and Sayama were in the way.

Thinking of gaining a line of fire down the far left or right, she stood up and flew straight down the corridor.

At the same time, Sayama and Shinjou finished turning and began to run.

But they were too slow and Kazami was too far away.

"Kh."

About halfway down the corridor, Kazami moved to the left side and slid down onto her right knee. She took up her sniping position

again.

She felt heat in her right knee because even her defensive stocking could not completely hold off the frictional heat.

But the panic in her stomach was even greater.

She held up G-Sp2, but…

*…I'm not going to make it!?*

Sayama and Shinjou were not going to catch up either. With only a few steps left, Hajji raised his spear in his right arm.

His target was Abram who stood in front of the metal door to the Concept Core storage area.

But Abram had several injuries and was in no state to fight.

So he said nothing, spread his arms to protect the door, and stared Hajji in the eye.

The two men prepared to clash.

But just before they did, someone shot out of the small corridor to the side.

Kazami opened the left eye she had closed for aiming and she trembled. She recognized the person who moved between Hajji and Abram.

She cried out the individual's name in a trembling voice.

"Lady Arnavaz!?"

●

As she ran, Shinjou was stopped by the arm Sayama suddenly held out to the right.

He stopped moving as if he had stopped breathing and he looked to Hajji's back ten meters ahead.

Shinjou slowly caught her breath in order to remain silent.

"Sayama-kun?"

After her question, she saw it.

Hajji had stopped his raised spear.

"Eh?"

For some reason, Arnavaz had rushed out in front of him and he had stopped moving.

Sayama nodded as if to answer Shinjou's silent question.

He slowly gulped for once.

"I do not entirely understand, but it seems Arnavaz-kun has taken command of the situation."

“D-did you know this was going to happen?”

After a pause, he shook his head.

“I had heard footsteps approaching from behind, so I had assumed someone would intercept Hajji-kun even if we let him go. But I never thought it would be a civilian. I was careless.”

Shinjou gulped just like he had.

…*No one predicted this situation.*

Just as she wondered what to do, she heard a voice from up head.

Of the three unmoving people, the voice had come from Hajji.

“Shahrnavaz.”

Shinjou frowned at that name.

Hajji had spoken his sister’s name.

…*What does this mean?*

With confusion in her eyes, she faced forward while holding her breath.

●

Hajji took a slow breath.

He knew very well who the woman before him was.

She was Arnavaz. The blind woman was the last princess of the Sahan family in this world’s Middle East.

She had agreed to marry into Abram’s Mesam family in order to revive her family.

Abram had chosen UCAT over the Mesam family and the Sahan family had been destroyed.

*However,* thought Hajji.

“Blind girl. Arnavaz of Sahan. I have already spoken the truth. Your husband, Abram Mesam, is a fake merely using the name. He is Sarv, the killer of my sister.”

He took a breath.

“Do you not believe me?”

With her eyes closed, she shook her head at his question.

Seeing that, Sarv who was going by Abram closed his own eyes behind her.

Hajji sent a sigh of understanding toward the floor.

“Princess of Sahan, please move out of my way. As the great general of 9th-Gear and the leader of the Army, I can no longer condone the killing of civilians. …And if you act as his shield, some

might claim UCAT used civilians to shield themselves."

"No."

Arnavaz frowned and shook her head.

"I will not move."

Those words triggered a certain emotion deep inside Hajji's gut.

The emotion forced its way up and escaped his throat as words.

"This man…has been deceiving you all this time!"

"I am aware of that," she said as if double-checking. "I am blind, so I must trust others to survive. And the Abram Mesam I had heard of was a man of medicine and known as a Fereydun. And yet…"

A small smile escaped to her lips.

"The man who came for me was a large warrior with thick, hard hands. Not even my brothers could compare. …I immediately knew he was not the same person."

"Then…!"

"Yes." She nodded. "But he held the hands holding the sword I had prepared for him, he got down on one knee, and he asked for my forgiveness. He even trembled when facing me. He was just like a child afraid of being scolded."

She took a breath.

"The desert family of Sahan is a proud family. The last daughter of Sahan had to show forgiveness to one who trembled and asked for it. Also, I am blind, I must trust others to survive. And he answered my trust in kind and has given me a blessed life ever since."

"But that is a life built on lies!!"

"I am aware of that. He is not Abram Mesam. Nor is he the Fereydun who saved lives on the path of medicine. But…"

Her unseeing and unfocused eyes turned toward Hajji. Her eyebrows were raised.

"He is my Fereydun. That is not a lie."

And…

"What are you to me?"

●

A moment later, Hajji raised his tightly-held spear.

"!!"

He raised his eyebrows and twisted his face as he used the spear

to knock Abram and Arnavaz to the right.

Abram held Arnavaz to protect her, but they both still fell on the small stairway.

"I…!"

With that shout, Hajji returned his spear from the right and prepared to slam it into the metal door.

But just as he began to attack, he noticed a power striking his right shoulder from behind.

He looked back and saw a boy in a vest.

"Listen. I will show you a world of pain."

Hajji turned around on reflex.

"Oh!!"

He launched a spear attack on the boy from directly above.

But as he turned, the boy's movements entered his field of vision.

The boy bent his raised right arm and prepared his stance.

His right knee was already rising.

His left foot was planted solidly on the corridor floor.

The force of that step sent his right leg straight up and toward Hajji's jaw.

There was no avoiding it, so it struck.

Hajji's body was knocked upwards from the jaw.

"!"

He cried out just as a blow hit his chest.

The boy had raised his right fist, rotated it back, and then slammed it straight into him.

After the kick to the jaw had stretched him upwards, the fist had struck the center of his body.

His sternum was smashed and his entire body creaked.

He heard the boy ask a question.

"Was that painful enough?"

●

Shinjou said a single thing concerning the scene before her.

"He did it…"

But she quickly tightened her grip on Ex-St again.

Sayama was quickly correcting his posture in front of her.

He could not move while lowering his hips to sink down.

But Hajji had not given up.

Shinjou had definitely heard his sternum break. More than the pain, he would be having trouble breathing without the bone supporting his muscles.

But he used all the air remaining in his lungs to attack.

He turned his left eye toward Sayama. That was the eye socket that seemed to contain pure darkness.

Shinjou did not know quite what it was, but her instincts told her it was dangerous.

“N-…”

She tried to shout “no”.

But in that instant, she saw Baku raise his front paws from Sayama’s head.

●

In a split second, Shinjou saw a battle in the past.

Inside a forest, she saw an unfamiliar boy’s back and a werewolf beyond him.

Back then, she had hesitated and not pulled back the firing anchor.

“…”

She had been afraid of hitting the boy.

She had been afraid of killing the werewolf.

But…

“But!”

With a voiceless yell, she woke from the past.

クロニクル

●

“———!!”

Shinjou fired Ex-St.

She did so without doubt, fear, or hesitation.

*…That way I won’t misuse this power!!*

The white light shot straight toward the left side of Hajji’s chest.

The blade-like blast entered between his collarbone and upper chest and it left through his back.

“…!”

He bent back from the impact and the gaze of his left eye was fired toward the ceiling.

Cracks instantly ran through the ceiling and it noisily shattered into pebbles.

But Hajji was still moving.

“Oh!”

That strike had been powerful enough to blow away a god of war, but he frowned below the scattering fragments of the ceiling, bared his canine teeth, and desired to clash with Sayama.

He held his spear close and sent it ahead of his body.

Sayama was not wearing any armor, so its blade was plenty capable of piercing straight through him.

But Shinjou simply opened her mouth.

She raised her eyebrows and shouted to the boy who crouched down in front of her.

“Don’t lose!!”

●

Pushed on by Shinjou’s words, Sayama took action.

He raised his right arm as he stood.

*…I need to remember the basics.*

He calmed himself, ignored the power and shouting in front of him, and gathered his footing.

He pulled his right foot back and pressed it solidly against the floor.

Supported by that, he placed his left foot a bit forward and to the left.

As soon as that left foot fell in place, he twisted his left heel

outwards, raised his left knee, and raised his hips.

That movement flowed into a rightward spin of his entire body. He twisted his hips, twisted his stomach, and launched his left shoulder clockwise and forward.

He sent his elbow out from that shoulder and gathered strength in what lay beyond it.

That was his left fist.

He launched a straight left punch with all his might.

The technique was obediently performed. His body had chosen this technique first to handle the emergency situation.

As soon as he clenched the fist, it filled with pain.

This was his phantom pain.

A voice reached him along with that false pain. It was a bestial roar attempting to crush him from above.

“You dare oppose me!? A child who did not even know the reason for his mother’s death will oppose me!?”

The beast’s words filled his chest with pain. It was the usual creaking pain.

The pain tried to rule his body and his entire body was briefly filled with an explosive chain-reaction of pain.

But the person he cared for the most had just asked something of him.

*…Don’t lose.*

She had not been referring to his creaking body.

She had told him not to lose to the enemy before his eyes.

In other words, she was not even thinking about this pain.

Why had her cry of support not taken this pain into consideration?

*…That is simple.*

He reached his conclusion.

*…Because this pain is only natural!*

His entire body moved. It was filled with the phantom pain and the creaking pain.

“But this twisting and this pain are who I am!!”

His left fist flew.

He forcibly launched it out from his shoulder and into the side in front of him.

It struck.

“…!”

The attack smashed the bones of his fist, but it had done equivalent damage to his opponent.

Through his fist, he could feel the sound of impact racing across his enemy's entire body.

It even reached his right leg drawn back for support.

He had fully thrown the punch.

Despite the blood, the torn flesh, the broken bone, and the creaking pain, he had sent out a powerful strike. In only a split second, he put his entire body into his resisting enemy.

"————"

He swung his fist and stopped it.

The full force of the strike filled the surface of his fist and knocked his enemy from his feet.

The reactionary tremor reached him, spread throughout his body, and caused him to shake.

The bell of emotion rang inside him and he thought.

*…Ahh.*

His heart felt like water.

*…And it is threatening to overflow!*

A moment later, his enemy crashed into the metal door behind him.

Ex-St's attack must have already damaged it because, after briefly stopping the man, it filled with cracks and shattered.

The sound of metal spread through the darkness.

The Concept Core pallets sat illuminated in that darkness.

They looked like gravestones.

And the enemy lay collapsed and motionless on the floor, staring up at them.

Meanwhile, Sayama looked to his left fist and took a breath.

He let out the deep breath and dripped sweat as he opened his mouth.

"…"

But no words came out.

*Oh, no,* he thought as he finally realized he was still leaning forward in his punching stance.

He quickly straightened up, faced upwards, and brought air into his lungs.

He inhaled.

He then felt heat on his back. It was the soft warmth of a human body.

It was shaped like someone important to him.

It was Shinjou.

He took another breath as she approached from behind and wrapped her arms around him to support him.

He opened his left fist overhead and felt a real, non-phantom pain.

“Everyone.”

He slowly spoke as he grasped the air and closed his eyes.

“Cry out in joy!!”

With those words, he felt all strength leave his body.

He had fallen unconscious.

# Chapter 38

## “Understanding of Goodbye”

Our hearts are drifting apart
I have no way of knowing it for sure, though

●

Mikoku ran through the forest.

She was traveling south. She had made sure she could cross the mountain and reach the road to the south within five minutes if something did happen to Hajji.

The truck for the men controlling the dolls was there and it could be used to evacuate.

The current situation required their help.

She had stayed behind as the rear guard and she was making a wide circle to draw away anyone pursuing them. Her winding route would cause the enemy to lose track of the rest of her comrades.

She simply ran and ran without making a sound on the dried leaves or breaking a single twig underfoot.

*…Hajji was defeated?*

But even if he had been defeated as the Army's strength, the Army's ideals and the rest of their strength remained.

Nevertheless, Mikoku clenched her teeth.

"If only I were more powerful…"

Her job had been to protect Shino and secure their aboveground escape route.

She had done that, but she had also allowed Sayama and Kazami to enter the building.

She knew the others would say it had been an unforeseen situation, that her job had been to protect Shino, and that she had not been asked to keep anyone out.

*…But I could not catch up to them.*

In their race to the building, she had not caught up to Kazami and Sayama.

Sayama was her fake.

She felt like she had lost to an imitation.

She had been unable to catch up and that imitation had defeated Hajji.

*Why?* she belatedly asked herself. She had much more training, she likely knew how to handle a weapon better than him, and she was the only one with the ability to regenerate.

But that ability was meaningless when she could not even catch up.

She only knew that the boy had not been looking at her.

*Why wasn't he?* she wondered as she ran. *Why was he not looking at me?*

Why would someone pay no attention to their back on the battlefield?

"Mikoku!"

That voice from behind made her tremble.

It was Shino.

The girl gasped for breath and approached with her white dog.

"You idiot."

Mikoku twisted her eyebrows but also breathed a mental sigh of relief.

If the Army's military might had not gotten through, it meant UCAT survived.

The coming battles would be political ones and individual ones. UCAT would have to settle things with the representatives of the reservations and of Top-Gear as well.

To put it another way, they would have to begin the true Leviathan Road that was held under the whole truth.

And Mikoku could remain with Shino until those battles were over.

*…What should I do?*

She could be with her, but she would eventually have to say goodbye.

If she mentioned that, Shino would resist it.

But Mikoku could not continue living as they had without saying it.

Not saying it would mean living a lie.

*…So would it be better to leave her now?*

The evacuation truck was up ahead. They only had to climb this hill and descend on the other side.

Would it be best to take Shino there, put her on the truck, but not get on herself?

After distancing Shino so much, should she start distancing herself?

But then…

"Mikoku."

Shino ran alongside her.

She worked desperately to keep up and her footsteps sounded

loudly on the dried leaves.

She turned to face Mikoku and forced a smile.

“I’m glad I can be with you here.”

Mikoku gasped when she heard that.

*…Sorry.*

She had pushed Shino away for so long.

She had told her not to fight, to stop training, and that she was inexperienced, but all of that was better directed at herself today.

Even after all of those outbursts, Shino was trying to remain by her side, so she made up her mind.

*…I will be the one to leave her.*

She would be able to contact Tatsumi and the others, work separately from them, and try to rid herself of this reliance on Shino.

So she ran with Shino to climb the hill, descend it, and reach the site of their parting.

Once Shino was inside the truck, she would close it from outside and say she was sorry this had to happen now.

*…That is what I will do.*

That decision lightened her heart.

She thought of the footsteps next to her as a precious thing instead of a natural one and she matched her breathing to Shino’s.

Shino’s breathing was dangerously erratic, but that worry would end here too.

“…!?”

Suddenly, she heard something.

It came from above. Something was falling through the branches and toward them.

She looked up and saw her enemy in the darkness between the branches and leaves.

It was the sword god.

The man named Atsuta had his eyebrows raised.

“You think I’m letting you escape!?”

He rapidly dropped down and swung his Cowling Sword, so Mikoku used all her strength to strike back with her own sword.

She opened her mouth, but it was not a cry of focus that came out. She spoke to the surprised girl next to her.

“Get back, Shino! Hurry up and escape!”

Her shout shook the forest, but she soon heard something unexpected.

It came from Shino's mouth as she remained stopped next to her.

"Why!?"

Mikoku turned to Shino and found the previous fake smile was gone. A natural teary expression had taken its place.

That was the girl's reaction to Mikoku's attempt to distance her.

"Why do you push me away!?"

She wanted to say that was not it.

She wanted to say that was not what she had meant. She wanted to say she had meant this battle was dangerous.

*…I do not want to push you away!*

Shino had to understand, but she was unable to restrain herself in this tense situation. Her emotions had reflexively exploded from her.

But none of this should have been happening here.

Immediately afterwards, three things happened.

First, Atsuta's dropping Cowling Sword struck Mikoku's sword.

Second, the force of that impact shattered the worn-down Cowling Sword's cowling.

And third, the concept contained inside the Cowling Sword was emitted in an uncontrolled state.

"!?"

A moment later, one of the hills in the mountains of Okutama was destroyed and collapsed.

●

Countless sounds of impact rang through the moonlit forest.

They were the sounds of black wings striking the trees.

The trees would spin through the air and fall back into the forest. Susamikado flew face up into the trees and created a canyon in the forest.

It stopped after knocking over a few trees, it was covered in damage, and it had several deep cuts in its armor.

White smoke rose from its body and a single footstep sounded about ten meters in front of it.

A white god of war stood taller than the surrounding trees as it stepped on the earth and stone.

A girl stood on the white god of war's right shoulder.

She wore a long sword on her back and she brushed up her black hair.

"You definitely didn't make this easy."

She wiped some sweat from her brow and smiled.

"Despite what happened afterwards, Hajji still said what he needed to say. I wonder what's happening on the Gear reservations right now. Are they perhaps refusing to speak with UCAT? After all, this completely overturns the basic assumptions of the Leviathan Road."

She had the white god of war slowly raise its two swords to chest height.

"But your negotiations weren't a complete waste. You did gain some cultural exchange and trust. But it is now time for atonement…and for our righteousness," she said. "Not that it matters for you. Our battle will end here."

Typhon swung down the sword in its left hand.

A moment later, Susamikado shot up into a sitting position.

The blade in its right hand raced up to catch the blade.

But Typhon's actions remained calm. It stopped its left sword to hold Susamikado's blade in place and swung down the other sword in its right hand.

Susamikado had no way of blocking this one.

"Farewell, fake."

Her words struck Susamikado.

In that instant, Susamikado's blade extended. No, Susamikado actually extended its swing to the right.

The black blade moved into the forest.

The forest was made up of trees and the blade chopped down one of them.

It intentionally kept the blade diagonal and the tree forcefully bent into a shallow V shape.

The cut top half fell toward Typhon.

"That is useless!!"

Typhon knocked away the falling tree with the left sword it had raised for defense.

It also took a step.

Its right leg stepped forward to swing down its right sword.

The tip of the right blade entered the left side of Susmikado's chest.

It stabbed in below the collarbone and a bit toward the side.

"…!"

The horizontally-oriented blade slid into the gap below the collarbone armor.

Without the armor, a god of war was nothing more than a collection of frames and components.

The blade stabbed through to Susamikado's back as easily as through tofu.

But Typhon did not stop there.

It tried to use the output of its right arm to pull the blade inward. That blade was caught between the collarbone and chest armor, so Typhon was trying to use that parting line as a guide and pull the blade to just below the neck.

"Miki! You'll regret doing this!!"

Tatsumi ignored Susamikado's shout.

Typhon pointed the bottom of its right arm toward the sky and moved to make the cut.

In that instant, Tatsumi heard a distant metallic sound. It came from the Japanese UCAT building to her right.

She turned in that direction and saw two enemy gods of war standing on top of the destroyed white building.

One was a silver god of war and the other was a maid god of war created from a mass-produced 3rd model.

Tatsumi saw the silver one lifting the maid one overhead.

The maid god of war was extended horizontally while the silver one was in a javelin-throwing pose.

At the same time, a shout came from the girl in a white armored uniform standing at the silver god of war's feet.

"Here we go!!"

With that, she swung both her arms to move the silver machine.

It performed a quick throw.

The maid god of war held its arms up in an X-shape as it broke through an explosion of water vapor.

After the sound of the air exploding, the god of war flew toward Typhon like a shell.

It had controlled its inertia and gravity to transform itself into a

light shell. If it returned its weight just before impact, it would have the same effects as a massive shell. The impact would likely smash its frame and internal components, but…

"Do you not care!?"

Typhon let go of its right sword and held out its right shoulder.

This was a defensive pose meant to endure the impact.

The moment the impact reached its shoulder, it would catch and eliminate that force.

Catching and negating strength was Tatsumi's specialty, so she would do exactly that.

She moved Typhon a bit to the left and away from the flying maid god of war. That way, she could redirect the god of war and immediately slice through Susamikado.

Or that was her intention anyway.

"Eh?"

Instead, a tone of question escaped her lips.

She then heard a light metallic sound like an empty can falling to the ground.

She saw the maid god of war fly up into the sky.

*Strange,* she thought. *My timing should have been perfect.*

But for some reason, the maid god of war had been knocked into the moonlit sky. And like an empty can at that.

"Why?"

She had great confidence in her skill, so this unexpected outcome stopped her.

She only froze for an instant, but at her level, that was enough of an opening.

She heard the answer to her question from up ahead.

"She didn't remove the inertial control. She knew this wouldn't work, so she acted as a decoy!!"

There was a reason that plan had successfully surprised Tatsumi and created an opening.

"Miki, you think you everyone is attacking you!!"

The black blade raced toward her.

●

As he piloted Susamikado, Hiba realized his blade had hit nothing.

Typhon had jumped back using its six wings.

If it made a counterattack now, this was all over.

"———!"

So he let go of the blade and threw it.

Typhon deflected the thrown black blade just as Susamikado's right hand grabbed the sword stabbing into its chest.

Hiba forcibly pulled the sword from his own shoulder.

"…!!"

He instantly pulled it out, rotated it around, and grabbed the hilt.

He held it forward, but…

"She's gone?"

The white god of war and Tatsumi had vanished from the split forest.

"Ryuuji-kun, up above!"

He looked up and saw Typhon in the center of the dark sky. It had its back turned, showing him its wings.

From its shoulder, Tatsumi turned just her head to look his way.

"Sorry, but it's time I left."

Typhon flew further up into the sky. A white line travelled south and divided the starry sky. That was the contrail produced by Alex's wings.

Typhon spread its wings as if guided by that line.

Back on the ground, Susamikado stepped forward without moving its left arm. It looked up into the sky like a child being left behind.

"What good is leaving!? The Army lost!"

"Yes, the Army did. But only as a military force and not as Top-Gear."

Hiba saw a bitter smile in the sky.

"But what about politically? And…what about us as individuals? Can you truly say that you defeated us?"

"Well…"

"The world will no longer forgive you and our war is not over. Even as you attempt to atone, you fakes will have to deal with your real versions from Top-Gear."

The white wings fully opened.

"Let's have some fun next time, too. Then, our battle can determine who is real and who is fake with no room for gray."

"Miki!!"

Susamikado called out and tried to spread its wings to pursue.

But the left wings refused to move. The second base moved, but the first base refused to stand up from the machine's back. It only produced the sound of components locking together and whirring fruitlessly.

"…!!"

Meanwhile, Tatsumi faced forward into the night sky containing that white line.

"Later."

She flew.

The full power of the six white wings took their owner away in an instant.

All that remained was the noise of the enemy tearing through the air to leave.

●

Lights dotted the dark forests of Okutama's mountains.

That white color attempting to resist the darkness belonged to the streetlights along a riverside road.

A single light tore through the darkness as if to assist those streetlights in their resistance.

It was a car's headlights.

A black limousine travelled quickly up the mountain to reach the Akigawa region.

The driver was a young man with short hair. He wore a black shirt and a blue suit and he spoke into the limousine's hands-free phone.

"Sister, I'm on my way back there. Has anything strange happened while I was away?"

"Hm? I-I-I-I didn't do anything. More importantly, Kouji, did you see the young master?"

"He only needed a suit, so he asked me to leave it with the guard. He said he still has work to do but he'll need a change of clothes afterwards."

"Hmm. Then I guess he won't be back at the dorm until morning. …Then, Kouji, buy me some ice cream at the convenience store on your way back. I want the experimental flavor of Garo Garo-kun."

"Yes, yes," said Kouji as he ended the call.

He reached for the gear stick and prepared to accelerate.

"!?"

He reacted on reflex when he noticed something odd up ahead.

He avoided it.

He moved the hand on the gear stick to the hand brake and yanked it up.

The back end of the car rotated to the right and he ignored the screeching of the tires as it turned.

"There."

After the car shot into the right lane and faced the opposite direction, he pressed on the accelerator.

He used the acceleration of the spinning wheels to cancel out the motion vector pulling the car backwards.

Once it trembled and came to a stop, he neatly parked the large limousine on the shoulder of the descending side of the road.

He then opened the door and stepped out.

Once out in the chilly night air, he looked behind the car.

"Who is that?"

Someone was collapsed in the center of the road.

It was a girl wearing some kind of thick black outfit.

He could see her chest rising and falling as she breathed, but her clothes were covered in mud for some reason.

This was a mountain road, but the upward slope was covered in concrete and the other side was a large valley. He looked up the slope but only saw a forest filled with dry leaves. Also…

*…There are no footprints leading here.*

And yet the girl's feet were covered in mud.

He frowned as he looked at her military-style boots.

"…"

Her right leg took a sudden bend inward at the inside edge of the shin.

"It's broken. Did she fall from above?"

He did not know, but the process of elimination left that as the only possibility he could think of.

He looked around to see if anyone else was around, but…

"No one. I can't even hear anything moving."

He lowered his shoulders and looked back at the girl.

He did not know what was going on, but he could not leave her here now that he had found her. He touched the hair covering her

face as he wondered if he should call for an ambulance.

The face he found below the hair was one he recognized.

She was the guest who had stopped by near the end of the morning. She was the one who had suddenly left.

His confusion left him as a question.

“Who are you?”

But the words that escaped his lips received a response.

The collapsed girl gave a quiet answer as she let out a breath.

“Shino.”

A moment later, she fully lost consciousness and her head slumped limply down.

“My name is Tamiya Shino.”

# Final Chapter

## “Destination of Prayer”

Is it light that needs no saving?
Or is it darkness that needs saving?

End.

●

Sayama slowly opened his eyes.

The ceiling was covered in darkness.

He seemed to be lying in some large space and his head rested on something.

“Is that Shinjou-kun’s lap?”

He looked up and saw Shinjou looking down at him.

He heard many footsteps around him and could sense people coming and going.

“How long has it been since the battle ended in the sixth basement?”

“Well…about half an hour, I guess. There was a landslide outside and Heo, Harakawa-kun, Mikage-san, and Ryuuji-kun just said they would be returning here. Also…”

She faced forward, so he followed her gaze.

“Izumo and Kazami? Excellent work, both of you.”

“Yeah, well you need to get that left hand of yours healed right away. It looks like we’re going to have a lot of problems on our hands.”

Kazami smiled bitterly and he gave a bitter smile of his own.

“Why did you not shoot when I was fighting Hajji? You had an open line of fire, didn’t you?”

Shinjou seemed to have been wondering the same thing because she tilted her head. Kazami shrugged as she answered.

“I just figured you could manage on your own this time.”

She turned her back without saying anything more.

Izumo was still looking their way, but she grabbed his arm and forced him to turn around too.

The two of them left the large room and likely moved out into the moonlight.

*…There is no helping that.*

Sayama smiled bitterly and relaxed. He needed healing, but he wanted to get some sleep first.

“Where is Doctor Chao?”

“A bit ago, Diana-san…took the four brothers’ Concept Cores to her.”

Sayama noticed a slight tremor in her voice but said nothing.

He simply lay on his side so only she could see his face.

She took a hand from her chest and brushed up his bangs as he looked up at her.

“Shinjou-kun, I would like a lullaby as a reward for my efforts. …I am exhausted.”

“I don’t want you to drift off and die. And…”

She narrowed her eyes.

“When you wake up, I have a lot of surprising things to tell you.”

“Of course,” he said with a nod.

He had a general idea what that would be, but saying so to act clever would be no fun.

“I hope you really do surprise me, Shinjou-kun.”

He smiled and she did too. She then averted her gaze.

“Um…”

With an embarrassed look, she brushed a hand through his hair again and opened her mouth.

She then sang. Her voice trembled a bit at first, but it soon calmed.

Sayama knew the song. It was the hymn titled Silent Night.

“Silent night, Holy night
All’s asleep, one sole light,
Just the faithful and holy pair,
Lovely boy-child with curly hair,
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace”

He listened to her singing voice and saw her exposed stomach next to his face.

Her well-shaped navel gently rose and fell with the rhythm of the song and her breathing.

He gained an odd sense of calm from seeing that movement and feeling her breathing and pulse through her lap.

She smelled nice.

Tempted by that scent, he tilted his head and placed his cheek and ear against her sweaty stomach.

“Ah,” she said and stiffened her lap, but he could now hear her breathing and pulse. It was a soft sound and he ended up matching

his breathing to hers.

He smiled a little in his heart and placed his lips just below her navel.

He could taste her sweat.

It resembled salt water and he made it his as the proof that this precious person was still alive.

*…What is going to happen to us? We defeated the Army, but that has left us with a major problem.*

What was Team Leviathan supposed to do about Top-Gear, the other Gears, and the other UCATs?

But he did not speak those thoughts aloud. He was losing the strength needed to move his body.

His consciousness faded and, just before falling asleep, he realized the source of the relief he felt from the heat and rhythm of Shinjou's body. It was a nostalgic thing he had difficulty remembering. It was…

…*My mother.*

He felt a slight pain in his chest as he remembered.

Long ago, his mother had held him and sang to him.

The pain in his chest grew and he curled up a bit.

Shinjou must have noticed his pain because she reached out and gently embraced him. She leaned over him as if to protect him.

"Don't worry. I'm here."

And…

"You're here for me."

Her words contained a hint of heat and he answered with a nod just as he closed his eyes.

●

Chao sat on a wooden bench and looked up at the fluorescent light on the ceiling.

She was in Okutama Station after the final train had already left.

She was alone in the small waiting area and the nighttime wind of late autumn blew in across the tiled floor.

But she turned to look at the vending machine shining brightly to the left of the bench.

"It's probably ending about now."

She reached into her white coat's inner pocket, pulled out a pack

of cigarettes, and found only one cigarette left inside.

*…Once I smoke this one, I guess I'll head back to UCAT.*

The Army had apparently attacked, but she knew just how useless she would be.

After all, she could not even move her body properly.

Her eyes were having difficulty focusing.

There was a simple reason for these physical defects. She may have extended her lifespan and stopped her aging, but…

"This is because I created those four in that area of distorted time in 7th-Gear."

She had enjoyed that, but she had spent so much time there that not even her extended lifespan could keep up.

She wondered what had happened to those four she had created. Had they won or lost?

Either way, she knew they would have helped Team Leviathan.

She wondered if it had gone well.

*…Did you enjoy yourselves?*

And…

*…Do you hate me for creating you to die?*

She kept her questions from showing on her face and she began to place the cigarette in her mouth.

"Ah."

But she dropped it.

The twisted cigarette fell on the bottom of her white coat that was spread out on the bench to her right.

Annoyed, she reached out to pick it up.

But then…

"Would you perhaps prefer this one?"

Someone held out a full pack of cigarettes with one sticking out.

She looked at the person who held out the cigarettes and wore a white coat.

"Oh, it's Nijun."

She hid her slight surprise and asked where the others were.

"We are all here. Ikkou and Mitsuaki are right over there."

She turned to the left and saw Ikkou and Mitsuaki in their combat outfits and trying to decide what to buy at the vending machine.

Yonkichi was in the back of the station building looking at the vacation pamphlets.

“Brothers! What about this Tohoku open-air hot spring!?”

Chao smiled bitterly at his question.

“You idiot,” she said. “Don’t you have something to do before going on vacation? What about Sayama and the others?”

“Testament. They should be very busy.”

She heard the answer, but she could no longer tell who it was who had spoken. *Not that it matters,* she thought.

*…They probably will be busy dealing with the other Gears and the remnants of the Army.*

She could not help them. *But,* she remembered.

*…You were the same, weren’t you? Sayama, Thunderson, Ooshiro, and Kinugasa.*

*Those children can’t do anything to help us with our days of stupid fun.*

*This is the same. We had our fun back then and I’m sure those children will have their own fun now.*

“How about we take a vacation?”

Chao’s bitter smile grew as she spoke in Yonkichi’s general direction.

“Long ago, Professor Kinugasa took us on a vacation. That was before I made you four. …We went deep in the mountains near Mt. Ikoma in Kansai. Hiba fell from a cliff and Siegfried burned down our cabin with one of his spells.”

*That was so much fun.*

“Yes, it really was fun.”

Suddenly…

“We…don’t have to go on a vacation,” said Yonkichi. “We can if you want, but things are plenty fun as they are.”

“Is that so?” she answered with a reserved nod.

She only gave that small nod to the answer she had wanted to hear more than anything else, but then she spoke from her heart.

“Thank you.”

Her vision grew white.

Was it the fluorescent light on the ceiling? Or…

“——————”

Her lips mouthed something. She did not know who she was speaking to, she made no sound, and it only took the form of motion.

“Let’s go.”

A small tremor ran through her body.

Her final heartbeat had sounded.

●

In the fluorescent light of Okutama Station's waiting room, Diana stood behind a wooden bench.

Chao's small and unmoving form sat in front of her.

A blue and a black sphere floated to Chao's left and a red and a white one to her right.

Her right hand was still inside her white coat's pocket.

Diana's paper bird had sent the four spheres over to the woman just as she had reached into her pocket for a cigarette and stopped moving.

After that, Diana had left it all to the spheres and turned her back so as not to intrude.

Chao had stopped moving, but she seemed to be saying something.

Once that too came to an end, Diana turned to face her back again.

Diana leaned forward a little.

"Thank you."

She took a breath.

"We will now go do what we must, given the truth we know."

Diana walked to Chao's side.

She stirred up a gentle wind as she stood next to the woman, crouched down, and took her still-warm hand.

She helped the woman grasp the cigarette and put it in her mouth.

At that point, Diana noticed the slight smile formed by Chao's closed eyes.

The woman gave a satisfied smile with the cigarette in her mouth.

"…"

Diana forced a slight smile of her own.

She heard rushing footsteps on a distant road.

They likely belonged to Team Leviathan and their comrades.

Diana wiped at the corners of her eyes as she listened to those footsteps.

She briefly hung her head before returning her twisted

expression to her usual smile.

“Doctor Chao.”

Diana looked up to the ceiling and spoke into the white light there.

“You had fun, didn’t you?”

"Give me a good answer."

# Afterword

And here is Owari no Chronicle 5-B.

So, how should I put this? Um, let's stop talking about the physical issues. They say a relationship won't last if you focus on appearances too much. ….You need constant change! Anyway, I was only able to come this far and ignore certain limits thanks to all of you. Thank you so much. This is the beginning of the end for Owari no Chronicle, so I think I will give this my all along with the characters.

And with that, it's time for the thoughtful chat.

"Did you read it?"

"Where's the manuscript?"

"I didn't give it to you."

"Then I can't read it! And what's the point of this afterword interview!?"

"Wait, wait. Hold on just a second, dammit. What do you mean 'interview'? Answer me."

"Isn't it obvious? This is the victory interview. Y'know, like in baseball. Oh, check on TV. Kiyohara is giving the most horrifying glare to the pitcher who hit him. Oh, there he goes. The Banchou sure is scary."

"I feel like you're wasting precious afterword space at a frightening rate."

"Then give me the manuscript. And some money please!"

"Saying it in English just makes you sound obsequious. Besides, you wouldn't read it even if I gave you the manuscript."

"Don't pout, you idiot. Listen. Giving it to me and having me not read it is half the fun!!"

"It's always interesting talking to the kind of person who digs through my games and starts playing them without asking."

"I wasn't actually playing them. I was pulling the cartridge out with the power on over and over to kill all of your saved data. It didn't work well though, so I must have lost my touch."

"You'd better give me a list of the ones you did that to. When I played Wiz the other day, all the characters were gone. There was supposed to be a naked ninja decapitated on the floor of the tenth

basement, but I guess I'll have to get by without that one."

"Ha ha ha. Now you're the one wasting space."

I kind of think so, too. My background music this time was Growing Wing from the game Nights into Dreams. Anyone who has played it to the final stage should understand the meaning of the song, but you might be able to understand from secondhand information since the game is a dream story.

Anyway.

"Who is looking farthest ahead?"

I'll leave it with that.

Now then, now then. Things will be quickly moving forward next time.

May 2005. The morning after an interleague game.

-Kawakami Minoru

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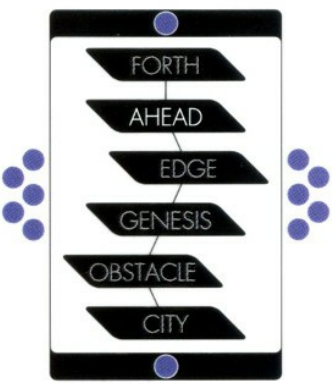


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